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ROCKET TO LIMBO

A Novel of Space Adventure

By ALAN E. NOURSE

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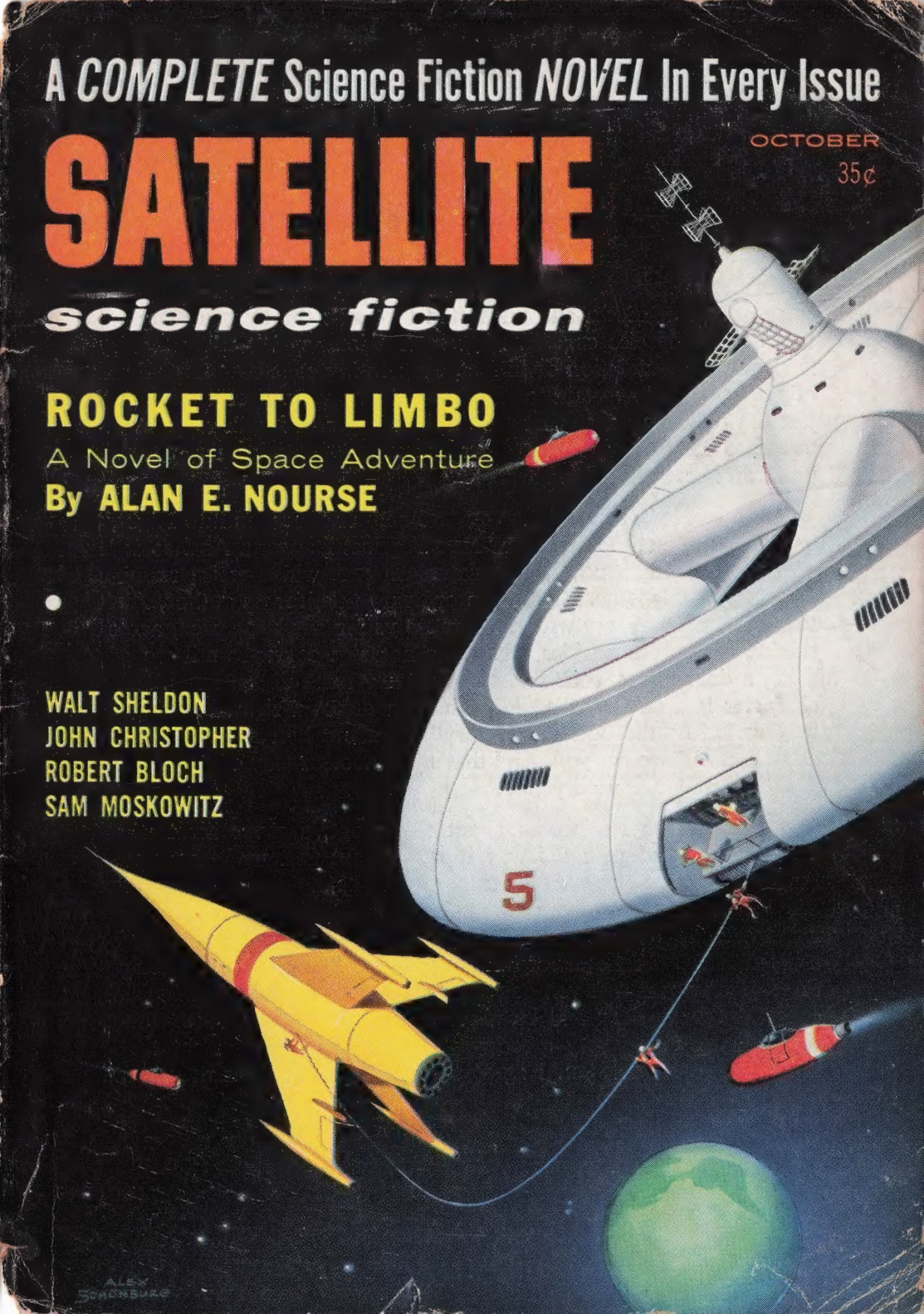

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We call it "The Long Voyage Home," or "Journey into Night," or "Men Against the Sea," or "Men Against Danger." And so it is with the full-length novel, ROCKET TO LIMBO, which we're running complete in this issue. It bears no ordinary title, for its author, Alan Nourse, is no ordinary writer. He takes us far out into space, across shining stellar immensities, and does not rest content until we are living a dozen lives, each one unforgettably three-dimensional. Each character is a strong-willed individual in his own right, refusing to be dwarfed by the bigness of everything about him and each character in turn becomes *you*. And that's just another way of saying that Alan Nourse is a fine storyteller.

And now a few words about this month's cover illustration. We're so pleased with the way it turned out that we know you'll forgive us if we don't even try to keep our gratification under wraps. We asked Mr. Schomberg to depict a Space Station—a manned Earth satellite—in full color and with depth and breadth and height to it, with the vibrant *feel* of reality—a Space Station so convincingly three-dimensional that you could pass from the airlock of a cruising spaceship to its deck and be welcomed by the Commander with a simple, earnest, friendly greeting, as if you had every right to be there. And we think you'll agree that the artist has done just that.

LEO MARGULIES
Publisher

SATELLITE
science fiction

OCTOBER, 1957 Vol. 2, No. 1.

A COMPLETE NOVEL

ROCKET TO LIMBO

by ALAN E. NOURSE

In the early days of space travel it took a ship centuries to reach the stars. Now the long voyage could be telescoped into a few short months. But explorers still paid a fearful price for knowledge.

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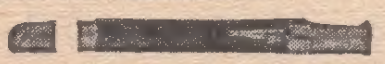

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ROCKET

It was a voyage without parallel—in time or space. There had to be shining discovery at the end of it, too—or the human spirit would taste the bitter, dark wine of defeat.

by ALAN E. NOURSE

A COMPLETE SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL

to LIMBO

PROLOGUE

AD ASTRA, the words on the bronze plaque read.

The heavy metal sheet was bright and new. It gleamed red-brown in the late afternoon sunlight and great bolts of brass buckled it to the base of the launching rack—a slab of grey granite cut in a single piece from the living rock of a mountain which loomed in solitary grandeur high above the rocketport. Spiraling up from the rack, the Star Ship itself looked like nothing so

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much as a gigantic silvery needle, poised, graceful, and seemingly eager to break away from the bonds of Earth, its bow pointing skyward toward the stars it sought.

Ad astra—To the stars.

The ship was named *Argonaut* in memory of a pioneering, historically famous rocket ship that had disappeared into space many centuries before. Her construction had been a dedicated task, involving the expenditure of human energy and creative genius in almost equal amounts over a long period of time. The finest engineers on Earth had designed her to carry the growth tanks and fuel blocks, the oxygen and reprocessing equipment, the libraries and information banks that her crew would require during the long voyage which she was about to undertake. Her massive engines had been tested and retested to a tolerance never before achieved on Earth.

They had to be, for the smallest flaw or failure could result in absolute disaster for ship and crew alike.

The ship's name was carved on the bronze plaque, along with the names of the men and women of her crew. Below this bold-lettered inscription were two date letterings—one complete and the other unfinished.

Launched: March 3rd, 2008
Returned:

The planners of the expedition had no way of knowing when she would return—if she ever did return. There had never been a ship like the *Argonaut* before. This was no clumsy orbit-craft constructed and outfitted to carry colonists to the outpost stations of Mars and Venus. The *Argonaut* was a Star Ship, designed for one purpose and one purpose only—to take her crew across the black gulf space between the stars. Her destination was Alpha Centauri and it was universally realized that her voyage might take centuries to complete.

None of the crew who launched her would live to make landfall at her destination. But if all went well their children, or perhaps their children's children, might survive to send the ship blasting homeward again.

In a very short time now the *Argonaut* would be bound on the Long Passage. And there could be no turning back.

Up on the scaffolding surrounding the ship lights were shining, and men were moving quickly up and down as last-minute preparations drew to a close. The gantry crane crept up and down, up and down, loading aboard the final crates of supplies. For weeks the giant nuclear engines had been warming up, preparing for the sudden demand of power which would thrust the ship away from Earth's gravity. A chronometer

clicked off the dwindling minutes. Gradually the scaffolding cleared of men and the great crane at last came down and stayed, its lights blinking out.

High up on the hull a pressure door swung slowly shut, sealing the silvery skin completely.

On both sides of the ship, well beyond the range of the blast gases, a huge crowd stood waiting in silent expectation. Across the land eyes were turned upward, hoping to catch at least a glimpse of the ship as she streaked up through the quiet sky. Others saw it on television, their eyes shining as they listened to the excited voice of the 3-V announcer. One thing was certain—the eyes of Earth were on the *Argonaut*—a crowded, war-weary, hungry Earth. Everyone shared the hope that lay behind the voyage and knew how necessary it was for Earthmen to build new colonies on another star system to relieve the terrific press of people on an overpopulated planet.

But there was another reason too. The stars were a challenge that Man had to answer eventually and the fateful hour had come at last.

A young woman in her early twenties stood in the crowd, watching the ship with eyes that were dry from crying. Her husband placed his arm around her shoulder, and drew her closer to him as they watched.

"What's the matter, darling?" he asked.

She shivered. "I'm scared."

"So am I," he confessed. "Everyone's scared, in a way. It means so much, and it's all so frightening. Those who saw Columbus set sail must have felt much the same way."

She nodded and clung closer to him. Her father was the first officer of the *Argonaut*. She knew she would never see him again, and that he would never set foot on Earth again. The trip would take too long. His life was the ship now, and the ship was his dedicated responsibility—the ship and the children who would be born aboard it.

"John, I wish we could go."

He nodded and patted her shoulder. "I know. It's not easy. But *our* work is here, darling."

"A hundred years—possibly two hundred! That's several lifetimes. How can they hope to make it?"

He watched the last of the ground-crew scurrying down the ramps, heard the expectant hush falling over the crowd. "I don't know, but they'll make it," he said firmly. "Great expectations seldom go down to utter defeat."

There was a restless stirring as the seconds passed. Then, like thunder gathering in the distance, rising louder and louder, the roar began. White flame blossomed

from the jet of the ship, billowed out in a searing mushroom against the fallout dampers, as the roar echoed and re-echoed down the valley.

Slowly, as if lifted gently on the magic fire the ship rose—slowly, then faster, higher and higher. The mushroom became a tongue of fire as the roar rose to a scream and the ship drove skyward. The eyes of Earth followed the great finger of light into the sky, not daring to breath, waiting, waiting—

And then the ship was gone, and a sigh rippled through the crowd, and most of the men and women turned their faces away from the sky. Quietly the crowd began to melt away, leaving the granite pedestal with the bronze plaque sitting in the gathering dusk. Waiting to receive the ship when she returned. Only the plaque would remain steadfast, for no one who saw the ship depart would be alive when it returned.

The Long Passage had begun.

The young woman clenched her husband's hand, and without a word they turned away. She felt her child move within her, and she smiled.

He will be proud of his grandfather, she thought, *if he's a boy.*

She did not know that the great-grandson of this unborn son of hers would be the man who would give mankind a Short Passage to the stars. Silently, John and Mary Koenig turned and left the field as darkness gathered.

I

AD ASTRA, the words on the bronze plaque read.

The block of granite that held the plaque was darkened with age and the bronze itself was green, the words obscure and extremely hard to make out. Lars Heldrigsson shifted his Spacer's pack down from his broad shoulder and bent over, squinting, to read the inscription.

Launched: March 3rd, 2008
Returned:

There was no date on the second line. Slowly the blond-haired young man ran his eyes down the names of the crewmen, and felt the old familiar prickle of wonder and excitement starting at the base of his spine. They must have been brave ones, those people, he thought. Trying to make a star-jump with ordinary, unassisted thrust engines! It seemed incredible, and yet they had done it. Where were they now? Dead generations ago, of course—but what about their grandchildren and great-grandchildren?

Lars tried to imagine being born and raised in the metal-and-plastic womb of a Star Ship, depending upon tapes and films for knowledge of Earth and Earthmen left

behind, never knowing the crunch of gravel underfoot, or the warm flush of a summer breeze on the cheek. Had they finally reached a landfall, ever, anywhere?

Certainly they had never returned to Earth. After three hundred and fifty years the granite launching rack still stood empty. The rocket port had grown up around it, engulfing it as the years passed, until it stood in the great central lobby of the busy Terminal, a silent monument to the desperation and bravery of the ship that had been launched there.

Certainly the *Argonaut* had never reached the planets of Alpha Centauri, its intended destination—for modern Koenig-drive ships had searched those planets long and diligently, and had found no trace, no sign that Man had ever come there. All the near stars had been reached and explored by now—Altair and Vega, Alpha Centauri and Sirius and Arcturus and the rest—and nowhere had a sign been found.

The *Argonaut* had become a legend now, a brave gesture of the past. But the thought of that hopeless voyage never failed to stir Lars Heldrigsson, to make him eager to be off, impatient with the years of study that had been necessary to qualify him for the Colonial Service Patrol. It was a legend of greatness, and there was still a challenge in the stars that time and a changing world civilization could never wholly destroy.

Of this Lars Heldrigsson was very sure.

He shouldered his pack again—it was a tiny fifty-pound bundle, the weight limit allowed crewmen on Colonial Service Ships—and walked quickly up the long ramp into the main Terminal Concourse. He was large for his twenty-three years, standing a full six feet two, broad shouldered, powerful. His height and weight had been something of an issue when he had entered the Colonial Service Academy five years before. And since then he had gained another two inches. If the truth must be told, he had barely passed the physical examination before Graduation—not because he had displayed signs of ill-health but because of his size alone. His shock of yellow-white hair, his blue eyes and the flat, heavy contours of his face revealed clearly his Aryan ancestry.

He seemed to move slowly and ponderously. Throughout his life he had had to contend with smaller, faster boys and men who made the unfortunate mistake of assuming that Lars Heldrigsson couldn't move quickly when he wanted to—to their enduring regret.

Now he stepped briskly out onto the Concourse, where he was almost instantly picked up and carried forward by the streams of travelers, crewmen, colonists and Security men riding the rolling strips to and from the launching

racks and busy loading platforms.

Everywhere there was feverish activity and bustle. Across the way he saw lines of colonists waiting for their final physicals and baggage checks before boarding the Star Ships that would carry them out to new homes—rugged homes, perhaps, and a far cry from the crowded mechanization of the cities of Earth. But they were at least homes where they could have an abundance of the good things —land and food and a place to raise their children. And each star colony was linked to Earth by the strong bonds of Colonial Service ships that travelled to distant constellations and back in a matter of months. And down the Concourse were the flashing lights of the shuttles leading out to the great ships themselves.

He stood before each ship in turn staring up.

Star Ship Tethys now loading colonists and supplies for the fourth planet of Sirius, an old Colony, well established, rich in land, rich in Earth-mutated wheat, too, a sub-tropical paradise with room for many thousands of families to settle and grow. Almost self-supporting now and soon to apply for independent elections and representation in the Colonial Council—

Star Ship Danton taking men and machinery to the newly opened colony on Aldebaran III, a bitter place until Earth weather technicians and civil engineers had carved a foothold for hungry Earthmen to find homes. A weather-beaten fisherman made his way onto the shuttle, with a gold ring in his ear and a tiny Arcturian monkey-bear on his shoulder, tossing three sparkling tele-dice in the air before him to amuse his pet and laughing as the creature hit at them with a tawny paw. There were great seas and many fish on Aldebaran III—

Star Ship Mercedes, exploratory to the far system of Morua, a double star with endless summer on its seventh planet, a good prospect for a new colony in ten more years, after the exploratory crews and the survey crews and the engineering crews and the pilot crews had done their work in laying the groundwork for colonization—a new escape valve for Earthmen who no longer had room enough at home—

Star Ship Ganymede—

Lars felt his heart pounding as he stepped across to the rolling strip bearing the green and white cross of the *Ganymede*. His ship! It was an assignment he had dreamed of since his first day in the Academy. To ship aboard the *Ganymede* with Walter Fox, the man who had opened more planets for colonization than any daring pioneer since the first Koenig-drive ship had left Earth! The man, in short, whose seal of approval on a planet was a virtual

guarantee of a successful and healthy colony.

This trip on the *Ganymede* had been organized in less than a month, and only a week remained before blastoff to bunk down the new members of the crew and get the Officers-in-Training settled in their duties. Then would come a milk-run to Vega III to conduct a final check on an important new colony about to be thrown open to free colonization. It would be a good trip to give an Officer-in-Training his space legs. There would be more far-reaching exploratories later, to unvisited stars, to unknown dangers. Time enough for that in the years ahead, Lars thought. Now it was enough just to be assigned aboard the *Ganymede.*

He glanced at the chronometer on his wrist and stepped off the strip at a refresher booth. The assignment orders in his pocket instructed him to join his ship at 1400 hours; it was now only 1135. He had time to catch a shower and get himself into presentable uniform before going aboard.

He wanted his first impression to be a good one, and he could see himself in his mind's eye, stepping off the gantry into the entrance lock of the *Ganymede,* saluting the flag first, then the officer of the deck— Walter Fox himself, perhaps? No, that would be too much to hope for. But perhaps Mr. Lorry then, the second officer, returning his salute with casual briskness and asking, "Name, Officer?"

"Heldrigsson, sir," he could hear himself replying. "Officer-in-Training. Planetary ecology."

"Oh yes, one of the biology boys. You'll be working with Dr. Lambert, I suppose."

"Yes, sir. That's what I've been hoping. Where will I find him, sir?"

"Up in the lab, probably. Glad to have you aboard, Officer."

In the refresher booth skillful robot fingers helped Lars ease off his travel-stained uniform, picked through his pack for disposables and discarded them all with a *whoosh* down the disposal chute. As new clothing popped out of the slot Lars stepped into the shower stall, still glowing from his daydream. He relaxed as sheets of warm water and detergent sponges enveloped him.

Even five years of intensive study and preparation in the Academy could never truly prepare a man for space—the limitation was understood and accepted from the start—and neither could they explain in advance the feeling of tension and excitement, the indescribable fever of wonder and adventure that took possession of you the hour before you stepped aboard a Star Ship for your first Officer-in-Training assignment.

He tried to explain it to his father during the two week gradu-

ation furlough from which he was just returning. It had been good to be home again for a few days, good to feel the warm winds coming up from the south, good to feel the bite of a pick once again in the rocky north-central Greenland soil.

The farm was the same as he had always remembered it—the heavy house built of glacial rock, the huge granite fireplace, the outbuildings, the fields of wheat spreading out for miles in every direction. His father had seemed unchanged, too, his face still burned red and seamed by the wind, his hands rough and brown. Mother looked older and more tired, her eyes bright with worry as she greeted her son. But she had smiled through the worry, refusing to say a word to dampen his enthusiasm for his new assignment.

He had spent the first days with Old Black, the huge Labrador dog who guarded the farm against all assailants, hiking the hills and valleys he remembered so well from his childhood. But he knew the question would come, and presently it did as he sat with his father before the fire one night after dinner.

"Why do you want to go?" his father had asked him. "What are you looking for, Lars? What do you think you're going to find out there on a Star Ship that you won't find right here at home?"

Lars had grinned, a little embarrassed. Just like his father, he thought, to dispense with preliminaries and speak his mind bluntly. "I don't know—for sure," he had replied. "I just know I've got to do it. I want to go where nobody ever went before. I want to do things that nobody else has ever done—or ever could do."

He patted Black's massive head, felt the dog nuzzle his hand affectionately. "Black knows why I want to go, Dad. Ask him why he always wants to see what the other side of the hill looks like."

"And you have to go on a Star Ship for this?" The old man lit his pipe and watched his son's face carefully. "You think all the frontiers are out there? You're wrong, son. Look at our farm, our Greenland. Why, in your Grandfather Heldrigsson's day our whole Greenland was an icecap!"

Lars shrugged. "The weather technicians—" he said.

"But isn't that a challenge? They took an icy wasteland here and made it the richest wheatland in the world. Look at the valley of the Amazon. That was a jungle once but now its crops feed millions of people. Siberia, Antarctica—rich land, son. There's work for you right here on Earth."

The clatter of dishes in the kitchen had stopped, and Lars knew that his mother was listening. He shook his head. "I've thought about it, and it's no good.

This is your frontier, not mine. There's no more room on Earth—and there hasn't been for years. We need colonies desperately, and the Star Ships have to find them. And I couldn't have a better ship than the *Ganymede*. I don't have to tell you that Commander Fox is the best planet-breaker in the business."

"It's a dangerous business, son."

Lars grinned. "Is that supposed to scare me off?"

"But you don't *know* how dangerous it may turn out to be," his mother said from the doorway. "Suppose you found hostile aliens on some planet far out in space—some race of horrible monsters?"

Lars laughed and gave her a bear hug. "Now you're just digging up things to worry about. There aren't any monsters. Hundreds of ships have gone to hundreds of stars, and never a monster. At least not an *intelligent* monster. They haven't found a single sign of alien intelligence anywhere. There just aren't any aliens."

"Your Commander Fox thinks there are," his father said soberly.

"He's never found any. I don't think he ever will, either. It's just a forgivable fixation of his."

"We still hate to see you go."

"You'd think I was going on a Long Passage or something," Lars said. "It isn't like that at all. With Koenig drive in our ship we'll be out to Vega Third and back in two months. I won't be gone for so long."

II

AND YET NOW, as Lars Heldrigsson slipped into the factory-fresh uniform and checked his pack again, he felt a pang of regret at leaving the place where he had been born and raised—the place where his family had lived since his great-grandfather had come north from Iceland to break the newly opened wheatland. It was a good home, and he would always love it—but he knew that his frontier, somehow, was on the other side of beyond.

Showered and glowing in the new uniform, Lars stopped at an Eating Bar for coffee and a sirloin steak, offering his Colonial Service card to the robot cashier. Then he stepped onto the rolling strip again. His service card and order sheets were in his pocket, readily at hand. As he reached the loading gates, he noticed that there was no shuttle car waiting at the end of the strip, and this puzzled him. Usually a car waited at each gate to carry passengers out to the ships. He flashed his card briskly to the guard at the gate and started to push through the turnstile to the shuttle platform.

"Hold it, there!" a sharp voice ordered.

He stopped. The guard was staring at him suspiciously. "What's wrong?" Lars asked.

"You," said the guard. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To the *Ganymede.*"

"The *Ganymede* is off limits to all personnel. That's straight from Security."

"But I'm on the crew of the *Ganymede,*" Lars protested. "I can show you my orders—"

Out of nowhere a grey-cloaked officer of the Security Police had appeared at Lars' side. "Trouble here?" he asked.

The guard nodded vigorously. "Caught this man trying to board the *Ganymede.* You know our special orders."

"Of course." The Security man turned his eyes to Lars. "You have papers?"

"Look, I *belong* on the *Ganymede,*" Lars said hotly. "What's all the trouble?"

"We can't just take your word for that," the Security Officer said. "Let me see your papers."

Lars fumbled open his order sheets and handed them over. The officer scanned them quickly. "Sorry. This won't quite do. You'd better come along with me."

"But it says right there—"

"I have eyes. I see a robotyped order sheet carrying a robotyped authorization to go aboard. But I don't see any countersignature."

Lars' jaw sagged and he felt his face flushing. "I—I forgot to get it," he stammered. "I was just starting my leave when the orders came, and it slipped my mind in the rush of things."

The officer gave him a peculiar look. "That so? You'd better come along with me."

Lars followed the Security man down a narrow side corridor and into an elevator. Moments later they emerged into a long room lined along one side with cubicles. The officer stopped at a desk, flipped the switch on a viewscreen.

"Hardy here," he said. "Get Jackson down here, and contact the *Ganymede* for me right away. We have a man here trying to crash the gate. He may be carrying forged orders—we'll soon know. Yes, of course it's urgent!"

He broke contact and turned to Lars. "Now, then. Let's see about those orders. In here."

He led Lars into a cubicle and strapped him into the seat of an Identi-robot. Lars pressed his palms against the charged metal plates, winced as the bright purple flash of the retinoscope clicked in his eyes. His card and orders were placed in a photochamber.

"I don't see why you're making all this fuss," Lars said. "Suppose I weren't authorized to go aboard the *Ganymede?* So what? Would it be such a crime?"

The officer just grunted and pulled the report sheet from the robot. "Okay," he said finally. "You just wait here a while." He went out, closing the cubicle door behind him."

Lars did not know how long he waited in the tiny, blank-walled room. His wrist chrono and pack had been removed before the Security man had closed the door. Lars paced the room. He watched the current news-tape flickering on a screen in the corner for a moment or two, then snapped it off in disgust. Too many unanswered questions were crowding his mind for attention.

He knew that his position on the *Ganymede* had been obtained in the proper fashion, in precisely the same way all Officers-in-Training received their assignments. It was customary for each Star Ship to carry two fledgling officers, to prepare them by actual field experience for the duties they would soon assume in full aboard ships exploring and opening new planets.

The vast matching-plan system placed qualified men on the ships of their choice whenever there was an opening, unless the ship's commander objected. To most men leaving the Academy, the choice of ship was not important, but with Lars it had been different. He had set his heart on the *Ganymede*. When his appointment had come through he had hardly been able to conceal his exaltation.

But now something had gone wrong.

After what seemed like hours, footsteps stopped outside the door. He heard the Security Officer's voice: "You're quite certain of this now, Doctor?"

"Yes, yes, there's no question." It was a voice Lars had never heard, a deep and pleasant voice. "He belongs on the ship, all right."

"Well—if you're sure. I'm sorry we caused all the trouble."

"Nonsense. You couldn't afford to take a chance."

"No, we couldn't, considering the peculiar nature of—well, you understand."

"Perfectly. Now where are you keeping Heldrigsson?"

The door opened and the Security man came in, followed by a tall man of about thirty with sandy hair and horn-rimmed glasses. "Looks like you're in luck," the Security man said to Lars. "I'll get your things."

When he had gone the sandy-haired man regarded Lars with a grin. "You sure picked the wrong time to go slipping up on little details like countersignatures! They'd liked to have had you breaking rocks on Titan for the next ten years. I imagine you'll be wanting these." He handed Lars his orders. They were now officially countersigned. "I'm Lambert, by the way. I think we'll be working together for a while."

"You're the ecologist on the *Ganymede?*"

"If you want to call it that. General biologist and jack-of-all-biological trades. You'll find that 'ecology' covers a multitude of sins

on an exploratory ship. But we'll have time to break you in when you get settled a bit. We're leaving Earth tonight, you know."

"The shipping orders say next week!"

"Strictly speaking, they do." Dr. Lambert chuckled. "But it's going to be a pretty short week."

"Look, I don't get this," Lars protested. "First they place me under guard when I try to board my own ship, and now you tell me we're blasting a week ahead of schedule. What's going on? Why is Security so worried about the *Ganymede*, anyway?"

Lambert shot him a warning glance as the Security man returned with his pack and chrono. "I think we'd better get aboard now before these boys change their minds. Let's go."

Five minutes later they were riding the gantry crane up the smooth side of the *Ganymede*. Lars clutched his countersigned orders tightly in an inner breast pocket. He could see the yellow light of the entrance lock high above him, and the unpleasant few minutes he had spent under guard seemed suddenly remote and unimportant.

"You'll want to get bunked down first," Dr. Lambert was saying. "The other Officer-in-Training is already on board, of course. You'll be bunk mates."

Lars nodded. "Who is he? Another bio man?"

Dr. Lambert shook his head. "Navigator. I thought you knew." He regarded Lars thoughtfully. "He's a classmate of yours. Claims you're a very good friend of his. But I must admit I didn't much like the way he looked at me when he said it."

"What did you say his name was?"

"Brigham," Lambert said. "Peter Brigham. Know him?"

Lars nodded slowly as the crane came to rest at the entrance lock. His lips tightened and any ideas that he might have had that the voyage to Vega III would be a milk-run vanished from his mind.

He knew Peter Brigham, all right.

III

FORTUNATELY perhaps, Heldrigsson had no opportunity to worry about his bunk mate when he stepped into the entrance lock of the *Ganymede*. Lambert spoke to the officer on the deck—a stout, ruddy-faced man whose upturned eyebrows gave him an expression of continuous surprise. "Mr. Lorry, this is Heldrigsson," he said. "He's the other OIT."

"Your new whipping boy, huh?" Lorry nodded curtly to Lars. "All right, get him bunked in and see that he knows how to strap himself down. Skipper can't see him now anyway, so we'll have to wait until after blastoff."

They made their way below toward the bunk rooms. As they went they passed through the laboratories—narrow compartments lined with cabinets and technical equipment. Lars recognized the ultracentrifuge blocked in against the bulkhead, and then his gaze traveled over the tiers of incubators, the agitators and water-baths, the cartons of pipettes and reagents still unopened, but secured tightly for blastoff.

"There's a big difference between routines you've learned in Earthside labs and the ones we use in the field," Lambert was saying. "Here we have to be compact, but we also have to be fast, accurate and absolutely thorough while maintaining strict isolation technique. Let a foreign bug get loose on board a ship, and that ship may be dead. But we'll have time for the details later. Your bunk room is aft of here. Better get settled now."

From far below in the ship engines were throbbing, sending a low, rhythmic vibration through every brace and floorplate. Lars stepped into the compact little bunk room. It was hardly more than a cubby-hole, with two acceleration cots one above the other, two narrow wall lockers, and a two-foot walk space alongside.

Under normal conditions the bunk rooms were used almost solely for sleeping, blastoff and landing. It was rumored that the Koenig drive did peculiar things to a man's insides. According to the stories, a man didn't care too much if the space was a little cramped. All he really wanted was a steady bunk to strap into, and nobody to bother him for a while.

A wall speaker crackled and a metallic voice exploded in the tiny room:

All hands check blastoff quarters. Blastoff will be on schedule at 2100 hours. Repeat. All hands check stations.

Lars heart began racing. In any Star Ship voyage the blastoff was a critical time. The Koenig drive could never be used safely until a ship had cleared a planet's gravitational pull. That meant that chemical and atomic engines had to lift the great weight of the ship from the ground and thrust it outward with gathering speed until escape velocity was reached. Giant gyroscopes helped carry the burden of stabilizing and guiding the great ship's course through the first hazardous five thousand miles, but the spectre of disaster was ever present until the ship finally rose free of gravitational demands.

Once in free fall the paramagnetic fields of the Koenig drive could be activated, hurling the ship forward through a distortion-pattern in normal space, carving the time of interstellar transport down to a fraction of that required with the Long Passage. The voyage to Vega III was scheduled for

two months. It might take a day more, or a day or two less, but essentially only two months—for a journey that would have consumed at least a hundred and fifty years on a Long Passage.

It was the Koenig drive that had given men the stars.

Lars began slowly to unpack, storing his personal items in one of the wall lockers. He had barely started when a voice behind him said, "Well! I couldn't believe it just on hearsay. I had to see for myself!"

Lars straightened up and turned slowly to the newcomer. "Hello, Peter," he said evenly. "It looks as though we're going to be bunk mates again—for a while."

"Just like old times, eh?" Peter Brigham lounged in the oval doorway, his quick grey eyes flickering over to Lars' belongings on the bunk. He looked two or three years older than Lars, though he was actually a year younger—a young man of medium height, with short-cropped black hair and a full lower lip that gave his face a morose cast. But now he was smiling—a little half-smile that Lars had grown accustomed to during the year they had bunked together at the Academy. "And here I thought you'd be stuck away in an obscure civilian job somewhere—a clerkship or something of the sort. But you made it, eh?"

"I made it. So did you, I see."

"Did you imagine I would not?"

"Oh, no. I just haven't seen you since—you know."

"Mmm. Since the prom, you mean." Brigham looked away. "No grudges, I trust."

Lars hesitated a fraction of a second. Then he shook his head.

"That's good. Say, are you still lugging this around?" Peter held up the little pocket photo-file from Lars' pack, grinning maliciously. "Any new additions?"

"Yes. A new picture of the farm."

Peter tossed it back on the bunk. "How are Greenland's icy mountains these days?"

"About the same as the New York jungle. You ought to get out and plow a field sometime. It might help you to get over this idea that the Northland is all cold."

The half-smile returned. "I should really be up in the Navigator's shack right now. But I thought: Here's poor old Heldrigsson stumbling aboard, and he'll need somebody to show him the way to the john." Peter's eyes narrowed. "By the way, I hear you had a little trouble coming aboard this man-trap."

Lars' muscles tightened. "A little bit. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. It's just another one of the cute little things that are happening on this ship."

Lars went on packing without any comment. He had never real-

ly liked this thin, bitter former classmate of his, and he could think of no one he would have preferred less as a bunkmate for two months in the cramped quarters of the Star Ship. But he particularly had no desire to confide his own conviction, just now crystallizing, that something was definitely not as it seemed on the *Star Ship Ganymede*.

"It was just a mix-up," he said casually. "It was straightened out in a hurry."

"So I heard. Old Foxy went to bat for you. It's just as well that he did. Those Security boys can get plenty rough when there's something to get rough about."

Lars just looked at him and went on unpacking. For a while there was silence. Then as Lars unwrapped a spool of reader-tapes he had brought along, Peter's eyebrows went up. "Books already," he exclaimed.

Lars grinned suddenly. "Tell you what. You flit around with your navigation headaches, and I'll study my specialty—okay? But when we get to Vega Third. I'll know everything there is to know about the planet. I'll know what kinds of bacteria and viruses can wipe out this ship, and every man on board her, and what micro-organisms we can safely use for defense. I'll know what plants we can use for food, and what plants to avoid. And I'll know whether there'll ever be a healthy colony of Earthmen on Vega Third or a crew of perishing skeletons."

Peter looked up at him. "Is that what all those reader-tapes are about?"

"That's right."

"Well, I like to see you keeping busy," said Peter, "but it seems a little silly to me . . . considering that the *Ganymede* isn't going to Vega Third."

For a moment Lars thought he had heard wrong. "What did you say?"

"You heard me. We're not going to Vega Third. We're not going anywhere remotely near it."

"But the dispatch bulletin—"

Peter snorted. "I know what the bulletin said. Routine run to Vega Third for a final check on the new colony site. That's what's going out on all the news tapes, too. But it doesn't happen to be true. I've been keeping my eyes open, and if this ship goes to Vega Third I'll eat those reader tapes right off the spool."

"Where *do* you think we're going, then?"

"I don't know. I don't think anyone else on board does, either —except the Skipper and the navigator. And those two are not telling. The navigator gave me a three-hour lecture on Koenig drive navigation this afternoon while he was setting up the coordinates, but he didn't set them up for Vega or anyplace near Vega.

He must have thought I didn't know anything at all about interstellar navigation."

"Maybe you don't," Lars said bluntly.

It hit a raw spot. "Look, he didn't put the ship in the right Sector! I could assemble and disassemble this ship's navigation controls in my sleep. I *know* those coordinates are fishy, but that's not all, by a long shot. Why all the secrecy? Colonial Security has had this ship under constant surveillance for a week. They've got agents all over the place. Special ID checks on all the crewmen. They've practically locked us in here since we came aboard. Why all the precautions if this is just a routine run to Vega Third?"

Lars shook his head. "Maybe they've uncovered a sabotage attempt or something."

"I doubt it. Nobody sabotages Colonial Service ships any more. And that wouldn't explain the other things. Like all those questions Commander Fox was asking."

"Questions?"

"About how we feel about the possibility of meeting up with intelligent aliens on some star system somewhere."

Lars felt a chill go through him. He knew, of course, that this was Walter Fox's pet theme—that somewhere in the Universe intelligent aliens must exist, and that sometime, somewhere, men would encounter them. It was not a pleasant thought. There was enough danger and death to face in exploring unknown star systems without meeting hostile members of an alien race. It had taken the Colonial Service many years to quiet such fears, to convince colonists from Earth that the possibility was too remote to be taken seriously. And yet—

Peter looked at him. "Shake you up a little?"

"It's nonsense," Lars snapped. "You're probably making a big case out of nothing at all."

"Oh, there's nothing glaring about it—just little things. And one circumstance I forgot to mention that isn't so little. There's something very unusual about the cargo we have aboard. It seems to be something that called for triple Security guard all the time it was being loaded. Some of the crates were very small, and must have weighed tons. And one of them broke open on the gantry coming up. The Security boys covered it in a hurry, but I got a quick look."

A half smile formed on Peter's lips. "Whatever was inside was wrapped in a lead blanket six inches thick. Now, what do you suppose a Star Ship could be carrying that would require shielding like that?"

The wall-speaker broke in with a series of squawks and squeals. Then Mr. Lorry's voice flooded the compartment. "All hands lis-

ten with care. The *SS Ganymede* will blast off in fifteen minutes. All hands strap down and wait for the broken signal. That will indicate the one-minute countdown. We will accelerate for one hundred and ten seconds on chemical thrust, then for seven minutes and twenty seconds on atomic thrust before the Koenig drive is activated. You will be uncomfortable, but the discomfort will pass. In each locker is a supply of amphetamine alkaloid to reduce the sensations of discomfort. You are advised to take two capsules now and a final capsule when the signal begins."

The speaker went dead with a click.

Almost immediately Lars was scrambling into the upper acceleration cot. Thickly padded straps closed around his arms, shoulders, hips and legs as he gulped the green capsule and waited, listening to the steady thrum-thrum-thrum of the idling motors far below.

It seemed hours before the wall speaker began a broken signal in a slow monotonous rhythm. *Beep—beep—beep—* The lights flickered and went out, and still they waited.

Suddenly Lars realized that he was frightened. Sweat stood out on his forehead; every muscle in his body was tense. This was no jaunt to the Moon, no quick run to Mars or Titan. It was a star-jump, the moment he had waited for since he was a little boy watching the flare of rockets rising from the southern sky, and now his mind was whirling with wonder and excitement.

To the stars, he thought, and the thought echoed back in the darkness with a sharp chill of apprehension: *To what star? Vega? Or somewhere else?*

Suddenly the *thrum-thrum-thrum* rose in pitch, growing rapidly faster, louder. At first Lars felt overwhelmingly drowsy as he sank back into the soft bunk padding. His body was heavy, his eyelids sagged, his face— But it wasn't sleep. A huge, unbearable feathery weight was pressing him down, crushing him, smothering him. He could hardly draw air into his lungs—

Minutes passed. The pressure grew. He tried to move his head, but it was pressed against the headrest with the terrible weight of the acceleration. *I can't breath,* he thought. *How long—?*

Then suddenly the pressure was gone and a new sensation replaced it. He felt himself growing big, huge, mammoth as the room and bunk around him seemed to shrink away. He had a sensation of falling steeply, giddily away—from himself, from everything. A rhythmic vibratto had begun, deep within his body and mind, growing constantly, shaking him. It was frightening

and deadly in its intensity. He tried to scream, but no sound came from his throat, only the silent vibration grower stronger every instant.

And then he knew what it was: the Koenig drive, thrusting the ship out into space with incredible speed, peeling away light years, shearing out beyond the bounds of light-speed and dimension, ramming the ship through a distortion of space itself.

They were aloft. Outside was —nothingness. For two months their ship would be enclosed in a protective cocoon of energy, shielding them from forces that could shatter them to drifting cosmic dust. They were in space, en route at last.

As Lars sank back into the darkness, the thought drifted hazily through his mind. *If not Vega, what star? For what purpose? And what impenetrable mystery surrounded the strange cargo in the hold, wrapped snugly in six-inch blankets of lead?*

Vaguely the thought drifted from his grasp as he tried to find an answer, then slammed sharply back into focus. His eyes flew open and he stared into the darkness.

Suddenly he knew the answer. There was only one thing the cargo could be. The ship was carrying bombs. Thermonuclear bombs, outlawed on Earth for centuries. But *why?*

As he sank helplessly into sleep, no answer came to that more far-reaching and wholly terrifying question.

IV

LARS HELDRIGSSON was neither asleep nor awake. For eons, it seemed that he lay still, enveloped in darkness, longing for sleep that would not quite come. The thunder and the thrum of the engine had taken on a musical quality, a militant beat repeated over and over and over like an ancient disc record caught in a groove.

He opened his eyes, and the world of nightmare unreality collapsed around him. John Lambert was standing by his bunk, swabbing his arm with alcohol.

"What—?"

"Just lie still and try to relax," Lambert said gently. "You'll soon be out of it."

Lars rubbed his forehead gingerly. "Does it always hit you like this?"

"More or less. You learn to modify it after a while. It's as much a psychological reaction as anything else. You're no longer legitimately a part of space-time as we normally know it. Just a kind of a bubble slicing through the continuum crosswise, you might say—though the math boys would squirm if you put it that way. They've got a lot of fancy terms for the Koenig distortion

field. Possibly as many as ten."

"I bet." Lars sank down on the bunk, still trying to orient himself. He felt as if he'd been sleeping for weeks. "Then we're on our way!"

"Yes, we very decidedly are on our way and then some. I would hate to have to take an ocean liner home from here."

"But we're not on our way to Vega." It wasn't a question the way Lars said it. It was a statement.

Lambert stopped rewrapping the syringe and looked up, startled. Then he laughed. "What do you mean by that?"

"Just what I said."

"Somebody in your family a telep? The kind of lad who can guess the time of day on eight different clocks blindfolded, and that sort of thing?"

"I haven't been able to work tele-dice since I was six," Lars said doggedly. "You don't need to be a telepath to know that something is very strange about this trip."

"Like what?"

Lars told him what Peter had said about the coordinates, about his own suspicions. He started to tell him what he had surmised about the cargo in the hold, but stopped. Something deep inside him seemed to be crying out in warning. *Don't play all your cards at once!*

Lambert listened to him, and shook his head. "Sounds like you've done some fancy putting-together-of-two-and-two," he said finally. And you're at least partly right, of course. The *Ganymede* isn't going to Vega Third. But I'm as much in the dark as you are as to her destination. All I know is that she blasted under secret orders, and that every high mucky-muck in the Colonial Service is nervous as a cat on a hot tin roof about her mission. This seems to be a very special-type trip."

"But they can't just shoot two dozen men out to nowhere without telling them what's in store for them." Lars protested. "It's—it's a criminal infraction of the spaceman's interplanetary rights clause."

"You'll find that the Colonial Service does pretty much whatever it pleases, Lars—law or no law," Lambert said dryly. "What are you going to do about it? Protest? Who are you going to protest to? You're in deep space."

"But Commander Fox—"

Lambert smiled. "I wouldn't go howling to Walter Fox too quickly, if I were you. For one thing, he's called a meeting of the crew for an hour from now, and may have some news for everybody then. Meanwhile, how would you like a glimpse at what deep space looks like."

The starboard observation pit was in darkness when they en-

tered. "We keep the opacifiers in operation in case anyone comes in unprepared," Lambert said. "Watch now!"

He pulled a switch and the pit was flooded with brilliant light. At first Lars thought it came from within the ship. Then he saw that it was coming in through the huge observation dome as the opacifiers slid out of contact. Lars stared, his jaw dropping at the brilliant display that lay before him.

He had expected vast blackness, inky blackness studded with myriad brilliant pinpoints of light. But there was no blackness, no sign of star-glimmer. Instead there were staggering flashes of brilliant multi-colored light: orange, yellow, blue, violet, each cutting impossibly complex patterns of radiance on the pale grey background. It was as though the ship were in the middle of a rapidly turning kaleidoscope, hanging poised in the shifting, whirling geometrical patterns, frightening in their intensity, and the very alienness of the impressions which they made on the human eye.

Lars knew, however, that there was no actual alienness there—only a distortion of space and time, wrenched out of normal shape by the tremendous energy of the Koenig drive. What he was seeing was only the reflection of twisted, tortured energy-channels altered violently by the K-field. Not until the drive was finally shut off would the familiar pattern of black space and brilliant stars return to view and then they would be in new stellar system, a new region of the galaxy with strange constellations replacing the familiar stars.

He shut his eyes, dizzily. A spectator could only watch for a few moments before the hypnotic luminosity became too dazzling to be endured.

Lambert snapped the opacifier on again and activated the lights in the chamber. "Surprise you?" he asked.

Lars nodded. "I didn't expect —*that*."

"I assumed as much," Lambert said, smiling. "You're due for a few more surprises before this day-period is over, I think. Let's get down for that meeting."

It was an uneasy meeting.

Lars knew the moment he stepped into the small, compact lounge that he was by no means the only member of the crew who had sensed that everything was not right. The men were waiting in small groups, talking among themselves in low voices, casting sidelong glances at the forward hatchway leading to the control room section of the ship.

Lars could see Peter Brigham across the room, talking rapidly to a thin, impatient-looking man with pale cheeks and prominent eyes, who blinked and nodded from time to time as he listened.

Other men, coming past them, stopped to listen, too, bending closer to Peter.

Lambert raised his eyebrows, taking the room in at a glance, and almost immediately a shadow of worry crossed his face. They took seats near the rear of the lounge.

"Your friend seems to be doing a lot of talking," Lambert said.

"So it seems. Who's that attentive listener?"

"The skinny one? That's Jeff Salter—assistant navigator. Morehouse over there is the navigator."

Lambert pointed to a cheerful-faced man who was perspiring over a tape projector he was setting up on a square metal stand on the opposite side of the lounge.

"Films?"

"Looks like it," Lambert nodded.

The forward hatchway opened and Tom Lorry, the startled-looking second officer came in, followed by a tall, heavily-built man dressed in Colonial grey. Heldrigsson's heart jumped. It was the first time he had seen Commander Walter Fox, although the explorer's heavy features, his severe jaw and the shock of grey hair above his pale blue eyes, were as familiar to Lars as his own face in the mirror.

Lars knew Walter Fox from tapes and films better than anyone on the ship did—for Lars had read every account of every expedition that Fox had ever headed. Yet it was still a shock to see the man himself walk in—a commanding figure, firm and precise in his movements as he smiled and nodded to the men and sat on the edge of a table in the front part of the room.

Tom Lorry rapped on the table for order, and counted the men present. There were twenty-two, including Lars Heldrigsson and Peter Brigham—a full complement for a first-class explorer in the Colonial Service. Lorry nodded to Fox, and took a seat near the projector, handing a spool of tape to Morehouse.

"Everyone's here, Commander," he said.

"Fine, then we can begin." Fox looked slowly around the room, his eyes stopping for a fraction of a second as they met Lars' intent gaze, and again when they rested on Brigham. "There's been a lot of rather wild talk going around the ship to the effect that there's something very strange about this trip—that we've blasted under secret orders and are not hitting Vega at all but another star system. So I think we'd better clear the air before we get into our normal in-transit routines."

Fox leaned back against the table. "These rumors are like any other rumors—they're partly false and partly true. It's perfectly true that the *Ganymede* has blasted under restricted orders, and that

we are not bound for Vega Third."

He paused to let the statement penetrate as a buzz of voices rose and the men shifted their feet uneasily. "Colonial Security regarded the secrecy as necessary, and I think you'll be able to see why in a minute. As for most of the wild stories I've been hearing bits of here and there, they're about as far off the mark as stories of that kind can get. You men aren't very imaginative guessers. Let's have that tape, Paul."

Across the room Lars could see a malicious glint in Peter Brigham's eye as he leaned over to whisper in Jeff Salter's ear. Then the lights dimmed and a wall screen sprang to life. The buzz of voices quieted.

The screen showed an image of a Colonial Service Star Ship, lying in its launching rack in Catskill Rocketport. At first Lars thought it was the *Ganymede,* but little structural details were different. Two gantries were busily loading the ship as Commander Fox's voice rose above the click of the projector.

"The ship you see here is the *Star Ship Planetfall.* She was a first class Colonial Service explorer, commissioned on November seventeenth, twenty three, forty-seven. That's just three and a half years ago. Anybody remember her?"

There was silence. Then someone said, "The *Planetfall*—yes! She was under Millar, wasn't she?"

"That's the one."

"Took her shakedown out to Sirius One and blew two generators?"

"That was before she was commissioned," Fox said. "It gave her a reputation as a jinx ship, but she was a good sound planet-breaker just the same. She carried the new modification Koenig engines that we have, and carried a full exploratory crew of twenty-two men. With Millar aboard her, she was equipped to approach any planet of any star system that could be reached in the lifetime of a man, and bring back all the data Colonial Service would ever need to open colony. You see her loading for a trip here. Good ship, the *Planetfall.*"

They watched the flickering pictures in silence as the camera moved in close. All about the ship was an eager bustle of activity. The camera settled on crates of dry-stores being hoisted into the hold, ship's name and destination stencilled on the sides.

"Wait a minute—" one of the men interrupted suddenly. "That ship was headed out into the Marakov Sector, wasn't it? A new star or something?"

"There's a man with a good memory," Commander Fox said. "Her first commission was for a big jump—out to the planetary

system of a star known as Wolf. It's a long way out there. The near stars with familiar colonies are just around the corner in comparison.

"Wolf had been identified on photo plates, and that was as close as men had gotten to her. We'd never had a ship anywhere near there before. But plate analysis said that it was a Sol-type star and that it had planets. *Planetfall's* job was to chart those planets and bring back all the information they could about colony prospects there. I don't need to tell you why. You know why Colonial Service exists. You know how desperately Earth needs new colonies for its people."

"I can remember the big hullaballoo when they blasted," a little man next to Lars said. "Full Three-V coverage and everything. They made a big production of it. That was just about three years ago—not even that long, come to think of it. But there was something I can't quite nail about it. When did she get back?"

"She didn't," said Commander Walter Fox quietly.

There was silence in the room for the space of a long breath. Then a babble of voices arose. "But I heard—" "There was some kind of a report—" "Yes, yes! The Colonial Service said—"

"The Colonial Service damped it out cold," Fox cut in with a loud voice. "They made a brief report in certain of the official journals that the *Planetfall* had had a disaster in space—something wrong with her drive—and had been blown to atoms. They buried the story in the public press for all they were worth, and only a very few speculations ever met the public eye."

The talking died as the Commander went on. "We know she blasted for Wolf two years and eight months ago. We know nothing happened to her drive because she was in drive-transmitted communication with the Colonial Service dispatcher on Earth from the moment she blasted out. She went into normal Koenig drive at the appointed time, and she reached the Wolf system. We know that. She reported six planets in orbit around a yellow-white sun, and she chose Wolf Four as the most promising of the six for a preliminary landing and pilot study.

"We know that, too—but that's all we know for sure. The *Planetfall* landed, and vanished. We had some signals from her during the landing processes, then no signals."

Fox snapped off the projector and raised the lights, then looked around at his crew again. "Our commission is brief and to the point, gentlemen. We're going to Wolf Four, and we're going to find that ship—if there's enough of her still in one piece to find.

If there isn't, our job is to find out what happened to the pieces."

He leaned back against the table again. No one had anything to say. They stared at him, at each other, shaking their heads. "Well, that's about it," the Commander said. "Naturally, there will be some changes in the preparatory routines. From the standpoint of equipment and preparation, we're on a frank exploratory cruise to an unknown system. That means full study program when we arrive, not just the spot check you anticipated for Vega Third. You'll have plenty of time to get ready, because we'll be three and a half months en route. Now if there are no questions, we'll break this up."

The very thin man called Jeff Salter had been whispering loudly with Peter Brigham across the room. Now he rose slowly to his feet, a look of angry mistrust in his eyes. "Wait a minute, Commander. We've got a question or two over here, I think."

Commander Fox frowned and faced the man. "All right, let's have them."

"Well, now—I mean, this is all pretty sudden, what with the men expecting a quick run to Vega and back." Jeff Salter's voice hardened. "And I don't quite understand the story on this *Planetfall*. Did she make a landing on Wolf Four or not?"

"She landed, all right."

"There were messages that got through?"

"That's right."

"I see. But did she *crash?*"

Quite suddenly all attention was focussed on the tall, thin man asking the question. Beside him Peter Brigham was sitting, carefully staring at nothing. "I mean, if she crashed in landing, and the signal cut off, there wouldn't be much sense in sending a ship out to find her, would there?"

Commander Fox's frown deepend. "She didn't crash. At least the messages from her seemed to indicate a safe landing. There were some legible messages from her after she had landed, but the atmospheric conditions apparently were terrible, and we didn't get very much. What we did get was all garbled and difficult to understand."

"But she didn't crash." Salter seemed to think about this for a moment. Then he demanded: "What *did* happen to her?"

"That's exactly what we're commissioned to find out," Fox snapped. "It sounds to me as if you're just trying to make this hard to understand, Salter. You can read the orders as they came from the dispatcher if you want to."

"Oh, I'm not much worried about what the orders say," Salter said. "Thing that worries me is just what happened to the *Planetfall* after she landed, and

just what the Colonial Service is getting us into on this trip."

He glanced quickly at Brigham, then back at the Commander. "I don't understand all this secrecy, for one thing. Exploratory ships have cracked up before and there wasn't any fuss made about it. So now why should Colonial Service be so almighty scared to tell the truth about the *Planetfall?* Why should they worry about how the colonists might react—*unless that crew found something on Wolf Four to be almighty afraid of*—"

"Let's keep our feet on the ground, shall we?" Fox's voice was suddenly angry. "What could they have found there?"

"That's what I'm asking you, Commander."

"We don't *know* what they found. I've told you that. We don't know what happened to them."

Next to Lars, Lambert was shaking his head. "Salter's just guessing," he whispered sharply. "Maybe their radio was wrecked, and surface conditions wiped them out before they could get it fixed. A thousand things could have happened. He's dreaming up spooks."

"He's not dreaming up anything by himself," Lars retorted. "Don't you see who he's been talking to?"

But Salter was on his feet again. "Commander, if this is just a simple reconaissance run to try to locate a lost ship, and if all you know is what you're telling us here, the whole set-up looks mighty strange. Maybe there are some things you don't *know* for sure but that you're very suspicious of and that we rightly ought to know about.

"Seems to me you've got a pretty good idea of what happened to the *Planetfall* when it landed on Wolf Four, and of what they found there. I think maybe you know why the Colonial Service was so scared of public reaction that they didn't dare publish the truth, too. Otherwise, why would we be carrying fusion bombs in the hold of this ship?"

Lars heard Lambert's breath hiss through his teeth. There was an electric silence as the men stared at Fox. The Commander's eyes turned for an instant to Tom Lorry—a glance of alarm, unmistakably clear. "Who told you *that,* Mr. Salter?"

Peter Brigham's voice broke out sharply. "I did. I saw them loading the things."

Fox rubbed his chin. He gave Jeff Salter a blistering glare, then turned swiftly to Brigham. "Yes. I see. Maybe you're the one who should have been asking all the questions, Brigham. Since you seem to be doing my thinking for me—what precisely does it all spell out to you?"

The answer was short and sharp in the quiet room. "Aliens," said Brigham.

It struck Lars like a blow, and he felt something cold knot in his stomach. He stared first at Peter, standing defiantly across the room, and then at the Commander. Suddenly all the strange things that had happened since he had stepped on the rolling strip to board the *Ganymede* twenty-four hours before fell down into place, and he knew it was the only possible answer.

It was a fearful answer.

Commander Fox slammed his fist down on the desk, and rose to his feet, his shoulders trembling. "All right, if you insist on knowing the worst I'll try not to disappoint you," he said harshly. "The *Planetfall* is in grave danger. We have no way of actually knowing, for certain, that she landed, and lost radio contact, and never reestablished contact. From the messages we couldn't get a clear picture of exactly what *did* happen. We could only guess, and suspect, and draw conclusions that might very well be erroneous. But we do know they ran into trouble—precisely what kind and, from what source, the future alone can determine. But whatever they ran into, it stopped that ship cold in its tracks and we haven't had a word from her since."

Commander Fox walked back to the table. "That's why the Colonial Service has maintained such rigid secrecy. It was not because of what they knew, but because of what they *didn't* know. Those last messages have been studied and analyzed in every possible way, and only one conclusion seems to make sense. The crew of the *Planetfall* encountered a race of intelligent aliens on Wolf Four."

Not a word came from the crewmen now. They sat like stone as Commander Fox continued. "We're going to Wolf Four to search for that ship, gentlemen. We don't know what we're going to find there—perhaps nothing at all. We may encounter a hostile power and have to retreat before a superiority fully capable of destroying us. Or we may find ourselves immeasurably enriched by contact with a friendly alien race. But from what we know of the *Planetfall,* we are forced to assume the worst. We're on an alien-hunt, gentlemen—a rocket to Limbo. And I am forced against everything I believe, to carry the most devastating weapons Earth has at its command. And we shall use them, if necessary."

The Commander nodded to Mr. Lorry and turned to leave. "If there are no further questions now, we'll fall out and get this ship into trim. We're going to need it."

The men sat where they were for several seconds after the hatchway clanged shut behind the Commander. Then, silently, they

arose and filed out toward their station assignments.

The talking started later.

V

ALTHOUGH A casual observer would have noticed nothing at all remarkable, it was clear to Lars Heldrigsson that a fundamental change had come over the *Star Ship Ganymede* and her crew since Commander Fox had revealed the true nature of their voyage.

The change was certainly subtle. There was nothing definite that Lars could point to, nothing that could be pinned down in a report or dissected under a microscope—but it was there as surely as Lars himself was there. It pervaded the atmosphere of the place, haunting the dim corridors, whispering through the crew's quarters and lounges, invading even the quiet confines of the bio lab where Lars spent the greatest part of his time. There was a sense of uneasiness, of something building and growing, something of fear, something of violence, constantly present, and yet never definable in any terms at all.

Wolf Four was what the Colonial Service called a "new star." There was no preliminary reports to rely upon here, no records of previous exploratories. It was planet-breaking in the fullest sense, in a system never before seen by men. And now the alien speculation added a new and frightening depth to the picture for everyone concerned.

In Lars' mind the concept of alien life was a large grey cloud of nothing—bottomless and featureless. No one had ever contacted aliens before. Small animals and animated plants, yes—even insentient mineral-like objects that seemed at first glance to have very rudimentary minds of their own. But a highly evolved alien being, a thinking, intelligent being was somehow awesome, The knowledge that such a creature might be waiting for them on an unexplored planet in space was both fearful and unbelievable.

Peter Brigham was in the bunkroom when Lars arrived. "Well!" he said tauntingly. "I thought you'd be high-tailing it to the lab to study up on the biochemistry of unknown aliens. Or aren't there any tapes you could make a guessing game out of up there?"

Lars lost his temper then. "Salter wouldn't have said a word if you hadn't fed him the questions, and you kno it."

Peter shrugged. "All right, so what? Who s going to listen to an OIT on a Star Ship? And it was time *somebody* had guts enough to ask some questions. Or maybe you'd prefer to stand by and let Walter Fox butcher the lot of us, eh?"

"Why blame Commander Fox? He's acting under orders just as we are."

"Sure. So was Millar of the *Planetfall*. Only the *Planetfall* didn't have quite the right orders to cover the situation." Brigham started for the hatchway. "After all, the Colonial Service isn't a military organization. Every one of us signed contracts for this voyage, and the contract I signed didn't say anything about Wolf Four in it, orders or no orders."

Then Brigham was gone, leaving Lars staring at the clanging hatch. He stared for a long moment. Then he roused himself and started for the lab.

There was work to be done.

Until his first hour in the bio lab with John Lambert, Lars had had no conception of the amount and variety of preparation required on an exploratory run to a new star—and after his first hour he had no time to worry about Brigham or the crew or the ship's destination or anything else.

Lambert was an excellent teacher. Where he might have been impatient, he was tolerant; when he might have skimped he refused to. "You can't know too much in advance," he would say over and over. "On a new planet the crew depends on laboratory findings for their lives. You have to know precisely what to look for—and what to guard against."

"But if it's a new planet almost everything about it may be new," Lars protested wearily. "I should think you'd have to wait and see what turns up?"

"If you confined your efforts to that approach, your first trip would very likely be your last," Lambert replied, chuckling. "Naturally, we can't predict specific problems and dangers until we get there. But we must be prepared for and know how to meet broad classes of trouble. What about bacteria and viruses? We must be ready to nail them quickly —to isolate the dangerous ones, and prepare vaccines. What about the atmosphere? We must be equipped to test it in ten minutes to determine whether it can support human life or not. What about plant proteins, animal proteins, the growing quality of the soil?" He slipped off his glasses and ran a hand through his sandy hair. "All we're trying to do is reduce the odds against us. You'll get on to it, but it means digging and digging."

And digging was what they did. As days passed Heldrigsson seldom left the lab except for meals and sleep-periods. Doggedly he worked to learn the testing techniques, the analyses, the evaluation procedures. He studied the standard flow-sheet of procedure to be followed, and worked out with Lambert places where their situation differed from standard —special trouble-spots, unusual

problems. Lambert set up test problems, based entirely on speculation, and then patiently went over them with Lars, pointing out theoretical omission here, sure death to the crew there, and slowly Lars learned.

At the beginning of the fourth day-period after the meeting in the lounge Lambert was gone when Lars reached the lab. A few moments later Lambert came in, puffing on his dead pipe, a worried frown wrinkling his forehead. He went about the lab grumbling under his breath until Lars said, "What's the trouble?"

"I don't know." Lambert shook his head disgustedly and sank down in a bucket chair. "There's something going on around this ship, that I don't like. It's nothing I can put my finger on. Talk, mostly. Grumbling and griping. Whispers. Sure, I know. Put twenty-two men together in close quarters for a few weeks and there'll always be griping. But this is different. It's got an ugly tone to it."

Lars chewed his lip for a moment. "There's something I've been wanting to ask you."

"Shoot."

"Did you know all along we were going to Wolf Four?"

Lambert looked startled. "Not by a long way! I knew we were under restricted orders, all right. But I didn't know why! And I didn't know we were carrying fusion bombs."

"And yet you, of all men on the ship, should have known. I still don't understand the secrecy."

Lambert looked at Lars narrowly. "They were afraid of leaks. Do you have any idea of the reaction home on Earth if news got out that a hostile alien had been contacted by an Earth ship?"

"Well, I suppose it would scare quite a few people."

"*Scare* them! You'd have a panic on your hands such as Earth hasn't seen in centuries! Your colonization program would go up in a big puff of smoke. The Colonial Service would be legislated out of existence. Earth would start arming, and God alone knows what would become of the colonies already established. The whole system would crumble, and we'd be back where we started three centuries ago. That's what would happen."

"But why? If nobody has seen an alien, why be so afraid of it?"

"That's exactly why." Lambert sighed and tried to light his pipe again. "Human beings are pretty brave creatures—as long as they know what they're dealing with. But put them up against something completely unknown—utterly inconceivable to them—and they'll panic. It doesn't make sense, but it's happened over and over. Fear of the unknown. It's plagued Mankind since the year

one, and we still aren't rid of it."

Lambert smiled wearily. "Aliens, by definition, are *hostile*. Walter Fox has been fighting that idea as long as he's been in space. It's common sense that somewhere, sometime, in centuries of exploration, men are going to encounter an alien race in the stars. They might be good, or bad. Finding out would be a fearful gamble, but if we could make friends with the right kind of aliens we could be immensely richer for the contact. Fox believes the gamble to be worth the risks. He believes we will meet aliens eventually, and that they will be friendly. He is a man of extraordinary courage and strength of will."

Lambert stood up slowly. "That's why I don't like what I'm hearing around the ship. The men are getting panicky—in spite of all the psych conditioning they've had, and all the care that went into selecting the crew for this mission. They're the best possible men in their jobs—and still they're panicky. To me that means only one thing."

Lars felt the knot in his stomach again. "What?"

"Someone on board is deliberately setting off the panic. Someone who's smart enough to keep under cover himself and put the words into other peoples' mouths. I think you know who that someone is."

Lars was silent for a long time. Then he said: "I guess I do. But why should he want to do it?"

"You find out the answer in time and you might save this ship a whole lot of trouble," Lambert said heavily. "Because we're heading for trouble now faster than we're heading for Wolf Four."

The talking was worse than Lars had realized. The tension in the ship had grown tremendously since he had dug into the work in the lab. In small groups whispering in the corridors, in hasty words passed across the eating bar in the galley, in a thousand looks, nods, and whispers trouble was spelled out in large letters.

Then one night matters came to a showdown between Lars and Brigham.

In his bunk, Peter looked up at Lars lazily. "Old Eagle-Eye! Been watching me, have you?"

"You bet I have," Lars said quickly.

"All right, then, suppose *you* tell *me*. What am I doing?"

"Look, what you're doing is no joke," Lars said. "You've got the men on this ship ready to fly apart any minute. Don't you know what's happening? Can't you see what comes next?"

Brigham sat up suddenly, and he wasn't smiling. His eyes were intent on Lars' face. "No—you tell me what comes next."

"Mutiny comes next. And you know it as well as I do. You've

been doing everything in your power to turn this crew against Commander Fox. You've put the words in their mouths, the ideas in their heads. And if you play your cards just right, you're going to succeed, too." Lars waited but Peter did not deny the accusation.

"I intend to make one thing certain," Brigham said through his teeth. "Walter Fox will never lift another Star Ship off Earth —even if it takes a mutiny to stop him."

VI

FOR A LONG moment there was silence as Lars Heldrigsson stared at the dark-haired man on the bunk. Then, slowly, he sank down on the bench along the bulkhead. "So it's *Fox* you're after," he said. "Not the ship's destination, or what we may find there. You're not concerned about that at all."

"Now you're getting the idea," said Peter.

Lars shook his head. "I don't get it. And if you're wise, you'll drop it fast. You're taking a very great commander, and you're trying to mutiny his crew and break him. Why? Who could we have in command better than Fox? He's led crews into unknown territory before, and they've trusted him, and he's brought them back without losing a man. Don't you *know* what Fox has accomplished?"

"Oh, yes, I know all right. You're the one who doesn't." Brigham gave Lars a scornful glance. "You're so sick with hero-worship you wouldn't recognize the truth about Walter Fox if it walked up and kicked you in the teeth. I don't know why I even bother talking to you."

"Go on. I'm trying hard to hear you out without letting go of myself."

"You've only looked at one side of the coin. The news broadcasts don't tell you the other side —that Fox is so convinced of his rightness in regard to first contact with aliens that he runs his crews into the ground in order to justify himself. He's lost more crewman than any other major explorer. Do you know why? Because he isn't satisfied with finding good colony sites and then bringing his ship home again to let the groundbreakers take over. He's got to scour every planet for evidence of intelligent life. If he kills half his crew doing it, that's just too bad."

Lars stared. angered and appalled by the virulence in Peter's voice. "You really hate him, don't you?"

Brigham's mouth twisted. "I hate everything he stands for."

"But it's more than that," said Lars. "It doesn't completely fit you, somehow. I can remember you back in school—always put-

ting on this show of cynicism and bitterness, acting like you hated everybody and everything. Yet you nearly flunked your finals last year because you spent all cram-week coaching Felix Barnes, who was on probation and flunking out."

Bridgham shurgged impatiently. "He'd have flunked for sure if he hadn't had help."

"Yes. But the fact remains that you gave him help. All that sarcasm and bitterness was just a phoney act when the chips were down, weren't they, Peter?"

"All right, so I'm an angel in disguise."

"Not by a long shot. But now you're putting this whole crew in jeopardy just to cut Walter Fox's throat for him. It doesn't add up. I'm slow, but I'm not blind. And all these stories about Fox and his crews on exploratories—"

Brigham was on his feet, his eyes blazing. "They're true!" He almost shouted the words. "You just don't know. You think he's great, but he's sadistic and stupid —just plain *bad.*"

Suddenly his voice was different. The sarcasm and arrogance was gone, and he was sincere, almost pleading. "Look. Just listen to me for a minute. There was a landing on Arcturus Four ten years ago—maybe eleven. Do you remember it? It was the first time a ship had landed there. The prelims had warned against it, but Fox went down. He could have flown the surface in an observation craft, but he was afraid they might miss something on the surface. He thought he had found evidence of alien intelligence on that planet."

Peter's face hardened. "He led his crew through a hundred miles of dust storms and desert without proper protection from the sun, without adequate food or water. He didn't find his alien, but when the men got back to the ship all of them had radiation burns, and three of them were dead. No, you didn't read the whole story of that trip, because they never published it.

"They were afraid they'd scare away colonists. They got their colony going, too, but the three men who died didn't come back to life. They put up a momument to them on Arcturus Four, and then forgot them and that trip just as fast as they could."

"Wait a minute," Lars said. "I read the log of that trip. There was something about dust-devils—"

"You mean Fox's obsession. Maybe you remember the names of the men that died."

"One was Markovsky—he was the engineer. And there was Lindell and—"

His jaw drapped, and he stared at Brigham.

"Go on," said Peter.

"I—didn't know, believe me."

"Three names on a gravestone," said Peter. "Markovsky, and Lindell, and Brigham. Thomas Brigham, navigator on the *Star Ship Mimas* under Walter Fox. My father."

Somewhere in the corridor beyond a time-bell chimed. Far below them the engines of the ship shifted subtly, driving the vibrating *thrum-thrum-thrum* a fraction faster. Occasionally they heard a voice above them, the clang of a boot on metal plates, familiar sounds of a ship en route, for a Star Ship is never silent. But in the tiny bunk-room it seemed for a moment that a separate world existed.

"I didn't know," said Lars.

Before, he had only seen the hatred that Peter Brigham had shown to the world. Now, with sudden understanding, he saw the misery and loneliness that lay hidden behind the hatred. He had a mental picture of a boy—maybe ten years old—with news that his father was dead somewhere, on some far planet, an empty void that nothing ever again could fill. An older boy, questioning, wondering, having to know why his father had died, impatient in his loss and misery with the published reports, seeking out other crewmen, questioning—

Lars saw it clearly, and shook his head in wonder. "You were determined to get aboard the *Ganymede,* then. To get to Fox some way—any way."

"I had to get aboard," Brigham said. "There are a good many men named Brigham. Fox would never know—until I got ready to tell him. I had to do it. He's got to be stopped, somehow, and I'm going to stop him."

"But what about the rest?"

Brigham's lips tightened. "I've got to stop Fox. I'm sorry about the rest, but I can't help it."

"It's wrong, Peter."

"He'll never take another Star Ship off Earth."

"But can't you see that you're taking it out on every man aboard this ship?"

"I don't see how. We'll turn him back. They won't have to go to Wolf Four, unless they want to, on another trip, with a man who's fit to lead them."

"Suppose you're right about Fox—and suppose you *don't* turn him back? Then what? Landing on Wolf Four with half the crew in irons, with no morale at all, with everybody afraid of everybody else—" Lars shook his head. "You could destroy every man on the ship."

Brigham's face was pale. He searched Lars' face for a long moment. Then: "I might reconsider. If there was a better way—"

"But there *is!*"

"What?"

"Look—I don't know if you're right or wrong about Commander Fox. I just don't know. But I do know that he's stepped over the line legally on this trip. Anything we do now is criminal, because he's the law on his own Star Ship in space. All right—we back him up now. We go to Wolf Four and find the *Planetfall*, if she's there to be found. Then when we get home we press every charge against him that we can draw up, and press it to the hilt. Kidnapping, conspiracy, incompetence—. *When we get home*, Peter, with a crack space-lawyer and all the trimmings."

"I can't back him now. I just can't."

"All right. But don't fight him, Peter. If you fight him, *nobody* will get home."

Brigham looked at Lars. "You'd stay with me on this, and see that justice is done?"

"If you'll stop this panic you've started and go along, I'll back you to the hilt when we get home."

"You give me your word?"

"You've got it."

Brigham scratched his jaw. "I might be able to slow it up. Salter is the one who's talking the loudest and he'll listen to me. But they're ready to blow any time. I'll have to move fast."

The lights in the bunk room went out.

Somewhere above them there were sounds of shouts and running feet, and a hatchway clanged shut. Brigham jumped up from his bunk, listening. They heard more shouts, and a shot.

"Too late!" Brigham whispered.

The wall speaker crackled, and Tom Lorry's voice roared out: "All hands, man your stations. Every man get to his station at once. This ship is now on emergency military orders."

The voice was choked off and the speaker went dead.

"The hold!" Brigham cried. "They'll try to get to the engines—" And then he and Lars were running pell-mell down the dark corridor, wrist-lights flashing, and the thought ran again and again through Lars' mind: *It's too late! It's already too late!*

What happened then came so fast that Heldrigsson never was sure of the sequence. There were a series of impressions—bodies moving, lights flashing, men shouting, the clanging of the battle-stations bell. He was rushing through darkness, following Peter Brigham's bouncing wrist-light down a hatch, along a corridor and finally down into another hatch, black as pitch.

Suddenly his light showed no floor, no wall—only a thin metal railing and a catwalk. Lars gasped, dizzy, as his boots went *ping-ping-ping* on the metal lathing. Then Brigham disappeared before him, and Lars groped at

the end of the catwalk for metal ladder rungs.

A moment later he was moving along a metal floor-plate, a walkway leading toward the hulking black engines, their hum a frantic screeching in his ears now. Brigham stopped, panting, peering into the darkness, and all at once their ears caught more footsteps on the catwalk above.

"Back here!" Brigham whispered, and jerked Lars along the walkway, which formed a bridge between the engine controls and the catwalk ladder. Three men, maybe more, were coming swiftly down the ladder now, and one was starting up the walkway.

"*Hold it!*" Brigham's voice cut out in the darkness. His light flickered on their faces. Jeff Salter was in the lead. Behind him was Robert Tenebreck, the geologist, and another man.

Salter stopped short, poised. "Brigham? Get out of the road. We've got to get those engines—"

"It's no good, Jeff. Fox was onto it. He was ready. We can't pull it off."

"I can damn well pull those engines off!" Salter roared. "That'll throw everybody off their feet for a while."

"It's not the right time!" Brigham's voice was urgent. "You've got to call it off."

Jeff Salter's thin face twisted. "Get out of my way, Brigham. I'm coming through there."

He moved straight for them, the others following. Lars pushed Brigham aside like a feather and met Salter with a full body block. His broad shoulder crashed into the thin man's chest, hurling him backward. Salter leaped to his feet with a roar and charged. Lars met him hard with a right that spun his head around, and followed with a hard left to the body.

Salter crumpled to the floor, groaning. But Tenebreck caught Lars hard in the shoulder, spinning him into the other man's fist. The fist connected before Lars could wriggle loose and strike out at both assailants.

Tenebreck fell to his knees, scrambled back up with a snarl and met Lars' fist full in the mouth. He dropped so hard his head clanged on the floor plate.

The third man glared at Lars, obviously reluctant to close on him. "Come on," Lars growled through his teeth. "You waiting for help?"

Suddenly the lights flashed on, and Lorry's voice bellowed from the catwalk: "All right, you! Stand where you are!"

Lorry scrambled down the ladder, a machine-pistol tight in his fist. Paul Morehouse followed him, eyeing the two men on the floor in surprise. Lorry moved quickly, patting Brigham's pockets. Then he nodded to Morehouse and spoke directly to Lars.

"Who stopped them?" Lorry asked. "Was it you?"

Heldrigsson swallowed and nodded.

"Was he helping you?" He jerked a thumb at Brigham.

Lars nodded again.

"Uh. Well, you'd better wipe off your chin. Now get up to the lounge, and lug these creeps along with you." He glared at Salter and Tenebreck, who were climbing to their feet. "Nothing funny now," he warned.

Salter groaned, clutching his head. Lorry grinned at Lars. "Come on, Horatio. Give him a hand."

The gathering in the lounge was tense and angry. Commander Fox was there, his face white, his lips cutting a thin line across his face. Lorry, Morehouse, Lambert and Kennedy, the photographer, were armed with machine pistols; Kennedy's arm was in an improvised sling, the white cloth stained with blood.

And across the room, sullen and pale, were Salter and Tenebreck and half a dozen others. There was no talking. They glared at Fox, but had nothing to say. The mutiny attempt, such as it was, had failed.

"All right, how many of you were in on this mess?" Fox asked, looking from man to man.

Nobody answered. Several of the men looked at their feet. Fox grimaced. "So. You've done a great job, the lot of you. You didn't quite get the ship from me, but you split it as wide open as you could." His eyes stopped on Brigham. "A fine job."

There was silence. Feet shuffled. Fox walked back and forth like a tiger in a cage.

"All right, if you don't want to talk, I'll talk. I run a peaceful ship. I give the orders on it, and my men obey those orders and back me up on the jobs I have to do. If they don't want it that way, they get off my ship. All right. Now some of you boys don't seem to like things the way they are. Salter? You've been doing a lot of talking. Let's hear what you have to say, right out in the open so everybody can hear it. Come on, sound off!"

"We've been sold a bill of goods, and we don't like it," Salter growled. "You've got no legal right to hold us here against our will, and you know it. We don't want to be guinea pigs in this alien-hunt of yours. We don't want any part of it."

"Who's this 'we' you're talking about?"

"The majority of the crew," Salter snapped. "They all think the same."

"Then just what *do* you want?"

"We want to turn back."

"So that's the way it is, eh?" Fox looked around the group. "Leeds? Do you go along with that?"

"I go along with Salter," the big engineer said. "I didn't bargain for this kind of trip when I signed aboard."

"Carpenter?"

"I say turn back."

"Mangano?"

"Turn back."

"All right, let's get the whole crew in on this. How many of you go with Salter?"

There was an angry rumble, and hands went into the air. Lars clenched his fists at his sides, counted seven hands, then saw an eighth hesitantly go up. Brigham's hand was down.

"And with me?"

Again hands went up: Lorry's, Morehouse's, Lambert's, half a dozen others. Lars raised his hand in the air.

"Brigham? How about you?"

"I'm not voting," Peter said quietly.

"You've picked the wrong time to ride the fence."

"I'm not voting."

"Mr. Lorry, what's the count?"

"Eight with Salter, thirteen with you, one abstains."

Fox turned his eyes to Brigham for a long moment; then with a growl of disgust he turned to Salter. "Seems like you've been listening to the wrong advice," he said slowly. "Well, now you're going to face a few facts. This trip to Wolf Four wasn't my idea. I didn't volunteer the ship, or the men. Colonial Service picked me, and outfitted me, because there was a job that had to be done. It may be a very dirty job, but it *has to be done.*"

He leaned back against the table, his face grim. "The Colonial Service has its back to the wall. An alien scare back home would be a disaster. It would mean an end to the colonization program that Earth has to have. The Service knew that the *Planetfall* has to be found, and we've got the job of finding her. It doesn't matter whether we like the job or not. We've got to do it with all the resources at our command. That means we can't carry dead wood. There's no place for cowards on this ship now. Am I making myself clear?"

Jeff Salter's face was pale. "You can't throw us off the ship in deep space!"

"I can, and I will."

"That's murder."

"You can call it anything you like," Fox said harshly. "Nevertheless, you have a choice, you eight. You've attempted a mutiny on this ship. Okay—I'm willing to overlook it because I need men and I need skills on Wolf Four. You can go along with me in landing there and back me up one hundred percent in the search for the *Planetfall. Or*—you can have one lifeboat for the eight of you and two weeks food and water, and we'll break the Koenig field long enough to

jettison you. That's your choice. Think it over. You've got ten seconds."

The men stared at him, and at Salter. Even Lars could hardly believe the harshness of the Commander's decree.

It was no choice. It was a death sentence.

"All right," Salter said dully. "We'll back you."

"I don't mean any half-hearted motions, understand? I mean full support. If there's any break at all, the eight of you pay for it."

"We'll back you."

"All right—get back to your stations. Mr. Morehouse says we'll make the Wolf system in record time; there's plenty of work to be done in the meantime. And if we're lucky, some of us may even leave the place alive."

VII

THE JOURNEY took seven more weeks. They hit a stable orbit 500 miles out from Wolf Four and started Schedule I rolling like a well-oiled robot. Ever-present in the black space-void, the huge orange sun that was the star Wolf glared balefully at them, like an angry giant, half-slumbering, half-aware that intruders were near.

Below them was the fourth planet, a dim grey sphere that lay featureless and silent in its cradle of blackness, reflecting the light of its sun in orange-greyness occasionally, and blotting out the stars in blackness at other times. When the planet eclipsed the sun the lead-grey color became pit-black. Only occasionally was there a break in its grey blanket, allowing a glimpse of the surface beneath.

Kennedy's cameras ground continuously. The little man's face remained buried for hours at a time in the view box of the telescopic scanner and Commander Fox stood quietly beside him, trying to discover as much as he could about the nature of the planet.

"Clouds," Kennedy growled again and again. "Nothing. Even haze filters won't break them."

"Something coming now," Fox said. "Watch it."

"Yeah. Polar cap. And now there's a break down below—brother! Ice halfway down to the equator. She's a cold baby, that planet. Got the heat suits in shape?"

Fox grinned humorlessly. "Dorffman" he said. "Any signs of life?"

The radioman shook his head. "Nothing."

"Don't drop it. How about the radar?"

"No signal of anything. Not even meteors to shake us up some."

"All right. Paul, drop us in

closer. Watch it carefully now."

They broke orbit, and the lead-grey sphere began to swell, to flatten as they moved. Still there was no sign of life. No aircraft rose from the surface; no signals went up. The planet might have been dead, but the cloud blankets were thicker than ever.

They took a new orbit at 150 miles. "All right," said Fox. "Get the servo-scout out and let's get busy."

The snub-nosed servo broke free of the ship and slid down in a descending orbit, moving in slow downward spirals and vanishing in the cloud blanket. Dorffman sat alert at the radio controls and hissed through his teeth. "Something wrong, I think—"

"What is it?"

"Magnetic storm. It's fierce! I'm losing it—no, there it is. But it's not stable. Either these instruments are way off or that atmosphere is wild."

The men crowded around him as he moved the controls. Far below the servo scooped up surface air and surface dirt, measured temperature, pressure, gravitation, wind-velocity. Dorffman strated it up again, and swore. They spotted it instants later, a bright metal chip zooming upward in a wildly erratic course, finally stabilizing and homing on the receiver slot in the *Ganymede*. Robot fingers opened it, transferred air and soil samples to flasks and culture plates. Then Lars and Lambert got busy.

Kennedy groaned as cloud banks whirled by below him. "Only a little peek once in a while. I'd better take the scooter down."

"All right. Go to it. But fifty miles is the limit, and get back here fast if there's a peep of trouble. Keep whispering in Dorffman's ear."

They watched Kennedy slide down in the camera-scooter, heard his signals to Dorffman dissolve into a rattle of indistinguishable static as he hit the atmosphere. They sweated him out six hours until he homed in, weary and disgusted.

"No good?" asked Fox.

Kennedy shook his head. "Nothing of value. We were right about the ice cap. Squares with the temp readings, too—mean equatorial temperature is about four degrees Centigrade. There are oceans at the equator, and a long continental land-mass. Maybe the next run will give me more."

The next run didn't and neither did the next or the next. But Kennedy kept trying.

Lars reported the atmosphere analysis. "Oxygen sixteen, decimal point, eight. Carbon dioxide zero eight, nitrogen eighty-one, point three. Inert gases make up the rest. No trace of sulphur or

chlorine or organic gases. It's a breathable atmosphere even if it's a little short of free oxygen."

"Radioactivity?"

"Some latent activity, but it's negligible. No concentration we can spot."

"How about micro-organisms?"

"They're there, but they grow cold. Five degrees is their optimum. They won't live in our mice, and Lambert doubts that there's any possibility of contamination. But we're making vaccines just the same. No sense in being heroes."

Fox gave him a tired smile and went back to the close films from Kennedy's last run. He had slept little if any in the week they had been orbited, and he felt weariness in every muscle. Frame after frame flickered before his eyes, sterile, empty of information.

"All right," he said finally. "Get the boys together. From here on in we're up to our necks." He gave Kennedy a hopeless look. "No sign of the *Planetfall* in any of the films?"

"Not a sign." There was no hesitation in Kennedy's voice.

"That's what I like about you," Fox said. "You're so honest."

Finally Kennedy said, "We need a close look down there—a *good* look. Let me take the scooter down close—three or four thousand feet. I'll see if I can't get some decent films. Then at least we could land on solid ground."

Fox nodded. "You want to try it?"

"You bet I do."

"Then get moving. The rest of you hit the sack for a while. I want some of you half-awake when Kennedy gets back. We may not get any sleep for a while after we've landed."

No one disputed the wisdom of Fox's words—but no one slept. They watched the little photographer slide the scooter out of her slot and zoom down toward the grey planet to vanish into the cloud bank.

Three hours passed, three and a half, with no sign of the camera-scooter. Dorffman got no reply to his frantic signaling. He swore and cut in on a different band, sweat standing in beads on his forehead.

On the wall the speaker crackled. "Lorry, Morehouse, Lambert, better come aft to the lifeboats. He should have been back two hours ago, at the very most. He's got twenty minutes more. If he's not back, we'll take two boats down."

Below them a vile grey dawn was moving across the planet's face. The star Wolf glowered an evil orange. The men were silent now, staring through the viewports, hardly breathing.

There was a glint of light be-

low, the whine of a jet engine, and a sudden crackle of static from the receiver, mellowing out into a readable signal. The men let out a cheer as the scooter rose from the clouds and began homing on the Star Ship. Minutes later it clanged into its slot, and Kennedy crawled from the cockpit, weary and pale but very much alive. He threw off his heater-suit with a groan. But his eyes were bright with excitement.

"The films!" Fox exploded. "Did you get films? Could you see anything?"

"Find a poor man a beer, if you can," groaned Kennedy. "I want to sit down." He stared at the men around him, and then said, "I got films, all right. Miles of films. I followed a break in the weather clear around that dirty ball, and I filmed her, by Jupiter. But you'll want to see my last reel first."

"You saw something?"

"I saw enough to shut me up for the rest of my life," said Kennedy. "I saw more than enough. Including the wreck of the *Planetfall.*" He hesitated, an odd look on his face. "But it was something else I saw that threw me. I just hope my camera saw it too."

VIII

THE WHOLE CREW was crowding around Kennedy now. Here at last was something tangible, something the men could grasp, some clear-cut and indisputable fact in the midst of a sea of uncertainty. But Kennedy would say nothing more until the film reels were unloaded from the cameras and fed into the processing baths.

"Those are my eyes," he insisted doggedly. "They'll tell you better than I can exactly what I saw down there."

"But you saw the *Planetfall,*" Commander Fox said.

"I saw the wreck of the *Planetfall.* At least it looked like a wreck from the glimpse or two I got of it. And you'll never never bring the *Ganymede* down close to her. She's spread all over the mountainside in what looked like almost inaccessible country. In fact—" The photographer blinked owlishly at the navigator "—Paul is going to have a time landing this crate anywhere on that planet.

"You see, there's only one continental land mass, lying on the equator, and almost every bit of it looks vicious. Mountains and storms, with gorges cutting a mile deep. Only one river, and that looks bigger than our Amazon—it drains the whole mountain range. And the whole country is covered with the meanest looking jungle I ever set eyes on."

"Jungle? In that climate?" It was Lambert's turn to look surprised and incredulous.

"Wait until you see the pictures."

Lambert lit his pipe thoughtfully. "If there's a river of that size, there's a delta."

"That's right—and that looked like the only reasonable landing place," Kennedy affirmed. "But I wouldn't like to navigate this boat down on it—and it'll put us a good seventy-five miles from the wreck in the mountains."

"Did you see anything suggesting survivors?" Fox asked.

Kennedy hesitated. "Let's look at the films, shall we? The wreck I saw looked cold as a wedge. But there was a valley over a pass from where it lay, and what I saw there—well, I'm not just so sure *what* I saw."

"What do you mean by that?"

"It looked like a city," said Kennedy slowly.

Commander Fox stared at him. "A *city!* Are you certain?"

"No—I'm not. Not by a long sight. Look, let me just run through it briefly." The photographer refilled his coffee cup and rubbed his forehead wearily. "I broke through the clouds just over this river, and I spent some time following it up into the rough mountain country. We'll have to trek up into that place, Commander. I wouldn't take the risk of setting even my scooter down there. The weather was terrible, but I got some good shots of the terrain.

"Anyway, I lost the river when it broke into smaller streams, and was just debating whether I should try to find a pass over the mountains from that level or go up higher when I saw something up on the ridge. I kept in low, and nearly killed myself ramming the ridge because of the fog, but I finally got a close look. There was *something* that didn't belong there, and on my final pass I got a clear look at the jets and fins of a Star Ship sticking up out of a snowbank high on the ridge. Then I saw chunks of hull-plate and smashed-up engines spread for five miles in all directions. And as far as I'm concerned, that's the end of the *Planetfall.* Nobody could have survived a crash like that."

There was tense silence. Then Fox said, "But the city—"

"I was coming to that. I had to scout for another hour to find a pass over the ridge, but I found one, and got through under the weather to a high plateau-like valley on the other side. I was just going to take a quick run, and then come back here when I saw it down there, and I thought my eyes were going bad on me. I thought I saw buildings through a break in the clouds. I had the cameras going full tilt, and made another pass, and than half a dozen more, and every time I saw something, all right—but it

never looked the same twice. It seemed to be shifting all over the place, and then I couldn't find it at all."

Commander Fox scowled. "Now look, a city doesn't go bouncing all over the countryside."

"Maybe not—but that's exactly what this thing was doing."

"Let's look at the films."

The first ones were dry enough for viewing. Lars helped Paul Morehouse set up the projector and soon they were watching the jerking landscape flowing by on the 3-V screen as Kennedy stood by to identify the locations.

It chilled every man on the ship to watch those films. It looked *cold* out there—cold with a savage bitterness that the bleakest winters on Earth could not match. The land was grey and cruel-looking, with jagged mountain crests and long rugged stretches of wind-bitten gray-green vegetation spread out like a jungle, clinging fungus-like to the rocky land.

They saw the river—yellow-grey, torrential as it raced down the mountainsides, spreading out onto a broad delta where it met the grey sea. There seemed to be trails through the jungle, but there were only momentary glimpses of these. Certainly there was nothing resembling a road.

Then the camera's eye turned up into the mountains, and they caught a silvery flash in the distance. Kennedy ran through long strips of film eagerly. "Here, now," he said. "I got it better a little farther along—there!"

Lars stopped the projector, and they gazed at the fuzzy picture. It stood out clearly from its surroundings—the wrecked hull of a Star Ship, its nose buried deep in snow and rubble on the high, rocky ridge, the great yawning holes of its jets rising up like another crag to meet the wind. Snow drifted into the gaping airlock. There was no sign of life anywhere about it.

Fox tightened his lips and turned to Kennedy. "Let's see that city."

Once again the camera's eye carried them along, higher and higher into the rugged mountains. Presently a pass appeared, and the ship skimmed through, barely clearing the crags as it slid down into the valley below. Kennedy sat forward eagerly.

"You'll see it now. It was right down—" His voice faded as they stared at the films. A ragged valley floor, passing swiftly beneath them, a break in the clouds, a view of more mountains in the distance.

There was no sign of any city.

They watched to the end of the film. "Is there any more?" Kennedy asked sharply. "Any film that didn't come out?"

"Not a bit," said Fox. "This

is it—all of it. Absolutely all."

"Let me see it again—"

Once again they watched. Commander Fox took a deep breath. "I don't see anything here that looks like a city."

"Neither do I," Kennedy said bleakly. He was silent for a long moment, staring at the screen. "Commander, *it was there.* I *know* it was there."

"Buildings?"

"Towers, spires, streets. I saw them." The photographer twisted uncomfortably. "I couldn't be wrong, either. It was like no city I've ever seen before. I'd swear it was nothing that was ever built by human hands."

Commander Fox's eyes were very bright. He walked to the observation screen and stared down at the grey expanse of planet that lay below as the men watched him and waited. Finally he turned, rubbing his palms together. "Mr. Morehouse, take the ship down."

"On the delta?"

"If that's the safest place to drop it."

"It's the only place," said Kennedy.

"Fine," said the Commander. "Put it down there, then. We're going to have a look at that ship on the ridge. We're going to have a look at that city, too—or whatever else it may be."

Three hours later Morehouse had demonstrated his qualifications as a Star Ship navigator by making a near-impossible landing without so much as a jar on touching down. The job had been done virtually blind, for as the *Ganymede* settled toward the planet's surface the clouds also had descended, and the ship touched down in a violent torrent of freezing wind and rain. Crewmen at the observation ports gave up their watch in short order; there was nothing to see but the black muddy ground around the ship, and the blanket of grey that swallowed it up on all sides.

They waited, breathlessly, for something to happen. Nothing did. The wind howled and died, the fog closed in closer, but that was all. Soon the greyness turned to blackness, and they knew that night had come. Meanwhile, the crew were at work preparing gear and supplies for the landing parties.

"I want six men on the ship at all times," Commander Fox told them. "Dorffman, you'll be at the radio to keep in contact with both parties, and to warn the others if there is any irregularity. Our first job will be a preliminary look around, primarily to determine the best route up to that wrecked ship. You can keep Mangano and Morehouse with you, and three others."

"Both parties?" Dorffman asked.

"Yes. The rest of us will split into groups of eight, and move out separately. Lorry, you'll be in charge of one. I'll lead the other, and we'll move in opposite directions from the ship, heading for the mountain range. You take Kennedy with you; I'll take Lambert. We'll want to move by daylight, if nothing turns up during the night to change our minds, so you'd better get things set up."

Peter Brigham had been busy in the navigation shack ever since Kennedy had returned with his films and his odd story of the "city" in the valley. When he finally got back to the bunkroom he found Lars poring over a checklist of supplies. "Well! What did *you* think of Kennedy's story?" he asked as he flopped down on the bunk.

Lars shrugged. "Not very much to think."

"But he didn't make sense!" Bridham exclaimed. "He says he saw a city. Only it wasn't on the film—not a sign of it."

Lars nodded. "Obviously he either saw something that the camera didn't pick up, or else he only *thought* he saw something."

Brigham said, "But what about the *Planetfall?* You saw the films. Did that look like the kind of a crackup that anyone could have lived through?"

Lars hesitated. "No"

"You bet it didn't. And yet there were messages broadcast from here after the *Planetfall* landed—remember? So the messages that were received must either have been sent before the ship landed, or else they weren't sent by the crew of the *Planetfall* at all."

Heldrigsson put his list down and stared at Brigham. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Well, think about it for a minute."

"What are you trying to say?"

"It's hard to explain it," Brigham said. "Look. Do you remember those abstract-recognition tests they used to give us back at the Academy—when they flashed colored pictures on the screen for a tenth of a second, and then asked us what we saw that was wrong? Most of them were simple—a man with a woman's hat on, or something like that. But then there was that series that almost everybody missed, remember?"

"You mean the ones where they'd omitted the processing for one of the colors?"

"That's right! Take a color picture of a mountain landscape, for instance, and just fail to process it for red. It looks awfully peculiar—but you're really up against it to say exactly *why.*" Peter jumped up excitedly. "That's what this whole business looks like to me—a color picture with one of the colors missing. Some

big factor, influencing everything that's happened, that we just can't even see. Something we're missing entirely."

"Of course, it could be the nature of the aliens themselves," Lars suggested.

"Maybe. But I'm not so sure it has anything to do with aliens. That's another thing. If there are aliens here, where are they? They certainly haven't come rushing out to greet us. But I think the thing we're missing is something different—and I don't think we're going to nail it down until we get close enough to the wreck of the *Planetfall* to see just exactly what *did* happen to her."

"Which crew are you going with?" Lars asked.

"I don't know. Have they been assigned?"

"I'm assigned to go with Fox and Lambert," said Lars. "You'd better check. We ought to try to be together."

"We will," said Brigham. "If I have to beat old Foxy over the head with his own log book."

Preparations were nearly completed when John Lambert conferred with Fox in the control room an hour or so before dawn.

"Supplies should be adequate for forty-eight hours, but thirty-six would be safer to plan on," he told the Commander, a worried frown on his face.

"The heater-packs are charged on the suits?"

"Oh, yes. We'll be warm enough."

Fox frowned. "Then what's worrying you, John?"

Lambert looked at him. "Walter, are you sure this is smart? Taking so many men off the ship at once?"

Fox chewed his lip. "You mean the talking that's going on."

"Partly. It isn't in the open like it was before—but it's still there. I don't think that Peter Brigham has anything to do with it this time, but it's an ugly undercurrent just the same. I'm worried that something is going to break wide open."

Walter Fox stared out the observation port, his hands clenched behind his back as he watched the slow orange-grey light spreading across the land. The fog had lifted; he could see the river now, and the mountains very close. He turned back to Lambert, shaking his head.

"You weren't with me when we ran up against the dust-devils on Arcturus Four, were you?" Fox asked. "No, that was before your time. Ten, eleven years ago. We thought they were intelligent aliens, at first. No, they weren't legends—they existed. And we know now that there was no intelligence, as we know it, in them—just a hungry, malignant, instinctive urge to destruction.

"They would have wiped out my crew if I'd let them sit there

and wait for the creatures to come. But I didn't do that. I got them on their feet and made them march. I shouted at them, and whipped them, and drove them." Fox rubbed a hand across his eyes, as though the memory even now was cruel. "I made those men hate me with all the bitterness they could muster, because by hating me they could keep alive, and by giving way to panic they would have died."

He paused, looking down at Lambert. "You don't finish paying a price like that for a planet very soon, John. You keep paying it over and over again. But you learn some things. I've learned enough to know that my men have to move into the teeth of this thing, whatever it is, that's waiting for us. It's here—I'm certain of it. And it's waiting."

"Well, maybe you're right," Lambert said finally. "I won't mind getting out and stretching my legs a bit. I understand Lars will be with us, and Salter. Who else?"

"Leeds, Carstairs and Klein. And there may be another. If you're going below, tell Peter Brigham I'd like to see him."

Brigham had not found his name on either landing party roster, and was somewhat startled at the Commander's early-morning summons. He found Fox alone in the control room, staring gloomily out at the frozen land directly surrounding the ship.

"Mr. Morehouse has given me a good report on your work in his department, Brigham," Fox began. "An excellent report, in fact. He thinks that with time and experience you could make a top-rate navigator. That's quite a compliment from Morehouse, I might add, and he's not given to compliments."

"Yes, sir," said Brigham tightly.

"I think maybe it's time we understood each other. I understand perfectly well the part you were playing early on this trip to turn the men against me. You know that—but you may not be aware that I also know why."

Brigham's face was pale. "Then you found out—"

"I know that you are your father's son, yes. I've known what you have been doing for quite a number of years. I've known that one time or another we were going to have to face things out. We can never break free of the past—and we never make decisions that are universally good. I owed you this voyage, and I hoped that out of it you might grow to understand what happened to your father so long ago. I hoped you might even understand why my decision was *right,* even though it killed Thomas Brigham. But be that as it may—I do know that I can't in clear conscience order you to join a

landing party here. You may go, or stay on the ship, as you choose."

Brigham stared at him for a long moment. "Lars is going with you?" he asked finally.

"Yes."

"Then I want to go."

Commander Fox nodded then, and offered his hand. Brigham took it.

An hour later, the first landing party moved through the lock and stepped down to the surface of Wolf IV.

IX

THE COMMANDER'S group began assembling. Salter and Leeds were huddled to one side with Bob Tevelrech of Lorry's crew, talking rapidly and quietly, but the Commander was concerned with a final check of equipment and did not notice the hasty conference. Heldrigsson could not find Brigham, at first. Then he felt a hand on his shoulder, and they checked each other's packs. But Peter was watching the conference closely, and when it broke up he moved in beside Leeds just as Lambert came up to join Lars.

They started across the frozen delta land, in pairs, with Commander Fox in the lead, carrying the light intercom equipment as they moved. The clouds were breaking to the sun-side, flooding the frozen tundra with an unspeakably gloomy orange-grey light.

"Real vile weather," Lambert said. "Right now, the sooner we're back snug in the *Ganymede* the better I'll like it."

As they made their way across a hard, frozen stubble, they occasionally broke through the icy crust, sinking ankle-deep into clinging brown mud. Ahead they could see the line of scrub trees clinging to the river's edge, and beyond the green-black line of the jungle's edge.

"It's strange there's no vegetation here?" Lars said.

"The region probably floods every spring," Lambert told him. "This is a poor excuse for summer time, but that's what it is. The ice will probably melt during the day and turn into a real quagmire. And there can't be much topsoil up in those mountains to catch the runoff of snow. That means it will fill the river during relatively warm summer days and cover these flats with mud."

He blinked as a flight of small black birds went by them at rocket-like speed. "Looked like ducks, for a minute."

"They were," Lars said. "About the size of robins, though. And I bet they'd be tough to eat."

As they approached the river they found a surprising variety of animal life scuttling away at their approach. Most of the creatures were grey or black, with nature's

universal color protection, blending perfectly into the turn. The sun rose higher, until the men cast shadows, but presently the sunlight flickered as deeper shadows crossed it.

Fox signalled a halt, and all eight men blinked up at the sky. Two mammoth hawk-like creatures were gliding across the cloud-studded sky, circling, returning. Hardly a feather fluttered in their wings, which seemed to form a black cape about their bodies. Suddenly the wings collapsed, and the creatures hurtled downward in perfect timing.

A startled animal-scream burst out near the landing party, and they heard the birds' wings crash open with a sound like muffled thunder. As they rose again into the air one of them gripped a furry creature that looked like a short-eared rabbit. But before it could make off with its prey, the other moved in to battle. In an instant the sky was full of feathers of the great hawks. They screamed and raked each other, the rabbit falling to the ground forgotten.

They moved on toward the river, loading their sample-bags with bits of the scrub vegetation, tiny insects scurrying out of their way. They also took samples of soil and rock. "How can they live in this climate?" Commander Fox asked, dropping back to confer with Lambert.

"Probably genetic adaptability," Lambert replied. "We saw the same thing in the microscopic flora. We can assume that this planet was not always so cold, and that the change came gradually. Possibly it is having an ice age, just as we know happened on Earth. I want to see those trees, though. I'll bet they're tough little plants!"

At last they reached the river, a wild, grey turbulent stream three hundred yards wide, throwing up a roar of sound that all but drowned out their voices. They moved up the bank, looking for a more favorable crossing place, and Fox signalled to stop for some lunch. It was as Heldrigsson sank down to munch his share of the self-heating ration that he made the first discovery.

Later they debated loudly what it was doing there, how it had gotten there, what its presence signified—but at the moment it was the source of unreasonable excitement, for it was a link, an artifact of home, of Earth, and Earthmen beyond doubt.

Lars had thought it a stone at first, sitting opposite it and blinking at it vacantly while he ate. His thoughts were far afield, and he must have stared at it for a full five minutes before his mind grasped the truth. But it still seemed like a stone—a gray speckled stone with the dim letters *S S Planetfall* across it.

Lars let out a cry, dropping his rations into the mud. He stared harder, and saw it was a bag, a standard, grey-canvas food bag, lying half-buried in the mud near the river's edge. The rest of the men gathered around, and pulled it open, revealing half a dozen ration cans, three of them opened, a tiny medical pack, and a formless paper folder that could have been nothing but cigarets at some time in the past.

"But how did it get here?" Jerry Klein, the energetic little meteorologist wanted to know.

"If this river floods, it might have come from quite far upstream," Lambert suggested. "Could they have come down from the wreck, do you think? Made camp here—or near here?"

They scattered along the river bank, searching for other artifacts, but found nothing. "Probably it was washed down from the wreck itself," Salter said gloomily. "Just one more reason to think that they're all dead."

"With three opened cans? They wouldn't have opened ration tins unless they were landed from the ship," Lars countered.

"All right, then they were attacked," Salter growled. "I can't see what difference it makes."

But it did make a difference . . . a very real difference. Here was evidence that could not be ignored that the *Planetfall* had made a landing on Wolf Four. But a safe landing? The food-bag only made the question the more confusing.

At any rate, they were on their feet again, anxious to be on. Once again Brigham teamed with Leeds; they seemed to be talking a great deal. Only once could Lars catch Peter's eye, as they moved on up the river bank, and when he did, he felt a shiver go up his spine. It was only a glance—but there was an almost eerie quality of appeal in it. It was as though Brigham were trying, desperately, to tell him something without words or signs. Yet when Lars paused to come closer Brigham shook his head angrily and motioned him curtly away.

Lambert saw Lars' puzzled frown. "What's up?"

Lars hesitated, then shook his head. "Nothing."

Lambert grunted skeptically, but moved ahead with him. At last they reached a place where the river was broader, but seemed less turbulent. Fox motioned them together. "It looks like there's some sort of trail along the far side. There might be a better view up the mountains from there. Think we can manage to get across with the rafts?"

Lars stared at the waterway. "I think I could paddle across with a line," he said. "Then it would be easy to ferry across, and we could leave the rafts there

to enable us to get back later."

"Want to give it a try? We'll have you secure with a line from this side."

It was not too difficult. They inflated the rafts with zero-zero two catridges, and loaded Heldrigsson's pack into another raft. Lars secured the coil of nylon cord to his waist, and pushed the rubber boat out into the stream. He paddled swiftly, not trying to fight the current but allowing it to help him. Slowly the far bank became more distinct, until he found a landing spot, and began moving upstream to the point opposite the party. Fifteen minutes later the line was taut to a gnarled scrub tree, and the party pulled themselves across in the rafts.

Now they were in the jungle—if it could be called that. The trees were twisted and short, with iron-hard branches and little clumps, of needle-like leaves. They cached the rafts securely among the trees and continued on.

At the top of the next rise the mountains were clearly in view, outlined in the now-fading daylight. Fox studied them closely with his field glasses for a long time. Then he grunted and handed the glasses to Klein. "See what you can see."

The meteorologist studied the rising bastion. "Rough," he said at last. "I thought I caught a glimpse of the ship, but then the clouds came down—"

"We'll go on a mile or so farther," Fox decided at last. "At least we may find a better camping spot."

They moved out again, and finally they found an open place, level, but with some protection afforded by an outcropping of rock. Here they set up the insulated shelter-tents, huddling in against the rocks for safety from the wind. Fox checked by the short wave talker with the other party, and shook his head unhappily.

"Lorry doesn't see any approach from his side. A solid cliff runs along the bottom. He's planning to go back to the ship at daylight."

"What about us?" Brigham asked.

"We'll scout ahead to see if there's a break in the ridge on our side. If there's not—it'll be up to Kennedy to drop someone up there, or else we'll have to figure another approach. But we've got to get up there."

Several of the men went out for scrap wood to build a watch fire. The thought of spending a night out on this desolate place without a cheering blaze to watch by was not pleasant, but they had no choice. They ate in silence. Everyone was weary from the trek. Lambert checked his pedometer and announced that they had made approximately eight miles. It had felt like fifty. It was

decided that Fox and Klein would take the first watch, Brigham and Leeds, the second. Peter was to waken Lars and Lambert to cover the third period, while Salter and Carstairs would cover the predawn hours. They all checked their pistols.

"Keep the fire going," Lars admonished, and crawled into his tent, setting his heater-suit at sleeping temperature.

Lambert stayed outside to talk with Fox and Klein for a while; Lars was still awake when he finally came to bed.

"What's the trouble, insomnia?"

"No—just too much to think about." Lars turned over restlessly. Certainly there had been no sign of an alien intelligence at work on this planet so far, and yet the threat still hung heavily. It took a long while for Lars to relax, but at last he slept heavily. Outside the clouds closed in to obscure the stars in blackness . . .

HELDRIGSSON AWOKE suddenly, his whole body tense. Something was wrong. There had been no sound, yet he felt danger screaming in his ears. *What had happened?* He tried to see, peering across toward Lambert and felt the hair rise along the ridge of his spine.

The fire. He had fallen to sleep with a yellow-red reflection flickering on the tent flaps. It was gone now. All that remained was a dull red glow.

He pulled himself to the opening of the tent, and stared out. There was deathly silence. Not even the wind was howling now and a pile of half-dead embers marked the spot where the fire had blazed.

With a cry Lars burst from the tent, staring about for the men on watch, his machine-pistol on ready in his hand. There was no sign of the guard. The pack-sacks, neatly piled near the rocks, were torn open, and their contents were scattered wildly about on the uneven ground.

Others began burrowing out of their tents now—Lambert, his eyes wide with alarm; Klein, stumbling like a drunken man as he pitched toward the fire; Fox, staring in dismay, his face ashen.

"What happened?" Lambert cried. "What's wrong? I heard somebody shout—"

They stood staring at the rifled packs, and blinking at each other, realization cruelly sharp in their minds.

"Gone!" Lambert said blankly.

Lars had run to the other tents, and was flashing his light inside. Suddenly he stopped short, shaking his head, his lips tightening.

Brigham, too, was gone. So were Salter, Leeds and Carstairs. Lars remembered the hurried conference—Peter's teaming with Leeds during the march, the quiet

talking. Abruptly everything was clear.

"They're gone, all right," Fox said heavily. "Ran out on us like—"

"But where could they have gone?"

"Where do you suppose? Back to the ship, naturally. Where's that talker. If I can get Dorfmann before—"

"You won't use the talker," Klein said quietly, pointing to a pile of junk which had been tossed in the mud nearby. "They've taken care of that. They've got the food, too—or most of it. Look at that mess."

"They can't get across the river," Lars said suddenly. Then he remembered the raft they had left by the shore.

"They not only have the raft, they have the line to ferry across with." Fox's face was grim. "Klein, we've got to try to stop them. It looks like they have an hour's start, at least—"

"Why try?" Klein asked. "Won't the men at the ship stop them when they see we're not with them?"

"I don't think so. I think this has been planned for some time. I'm sorry, Lars, but it *must* have been planned. If Lorry has had a run-out too, there would be enough of them to take the ship. We've got to stop them. If we don't—there may not be any ship when we get back."

He and Klein checked their guns. "Lambert, you and Heldrigsson stick here. See if there's any chance of getting that talker working. The river will delay them, and we may be able to stop them there." With that the two men started down the trail toward the river again.

Lars piled the fire high, avoiding Dr. Lambert's eyes as he worked to make order of the rifled packs. High above the clouds were gone, and stars shone like cold, unwinking eyes. It was colder now, and Lars turned up his heater control.

"Better spare that," Lambert said quietly. "We may need it badly."

They sat about the fire, waiting as a half hour passed, then an hour. A grey dawn was creeping up the horizon as they peered anxiously in the direction of the ship. "Do you think they'll blast if they get to the ship and take it?" Lars asked.

"I'm afraid so."

"But that would leave us—"

"Yes. It would leave us in a desperate situation." Lambert's lips were a grim line. "Keep watching. We'll see the blast from here."

They watched, expecting momentarily to see the bright orange-red jet trail suddenly rise into the sky. But there was no sign. At last they heard noises down the trail, and Fox and Klein came plod-

ding toward them and sank wearily down by the fire. Defeat was written in heavy lines across their faces.

"You saw it, I suppose," Fox said lifelessly."

"Saw what?" Lambert frowned.

"The blast-off. It must have been visible from up here."

"We didn't see any blast-off," Lars said stolidly. "We've been watching. We couldn't possibly have failed to notice the flare."

Fox and Klein exchanged puzzled glances. "That's odd," said Fox. "We followed them, and dragged ourselves across the river on the line. We followed their trail clear across the delta to the place where the ship had been. They must have been successful in taking Dorffman and the others by surprise. It's an ugly business, all right."

"Look," said Lars. "That ship never blasted—with Salter and his crowd in charge of it, or anybody else. I'm absolutely sure of that."

"It must have," Commander Fox said grimly. "Because it's gone. *There isn't any ship on the delta where we set her down.* There's *nothing* out there." He looked intently at Lars and Lambert and Klein. "And you know we're stranded here. It means we've got to reach that ship up there on the ridge, and reach her fast—if we don't want to starve to death."

X

IT TOOK Heldrigsson several moments to fully realize the enormity of Commander Fox's brief, grim statement of the facts. The *Ganymede* was gone. They had neither seen nor heard the blast-off, but it had vanished nevertheless. Like the silent deserters who had rifled the packs during the night. the ship had suddenly and incredibly disappeared.

They were alone—Commander Walter Fox, Jerry Klein, John Lambert, and himself. They had sufficient power to keep their heater-units in operation for another twenty-eight hours. And with luck their food supply might last two days. Beyond that—nothing.

"What about Lorry and his group?" Lambert asked quietly.

"No sign of them," Fox said. "They may still be sleeping, for all I know."

"Shouldn't we try to contact them?"

"It would mean crossing the river at least once, and then crossing back," Fox replied slowly. "It would mean losing heat and using up an extra day's food—assuming that nothing has happened to them. No, we're going to need that heat and food ourselves, John. We can only hope and pray that we'll find more food up there —" he gestured toward the black cliffs of the ridge—"where the bag

came from. I don't think we'd survive very long trying to live off the land."

"At least we could give them a burst of gunfire to let them know we were still alive," Klein said.

"We could try it," Fox said cautiously. "Just a short round. though. We may need the ammunition."

Klein lifted his machine-pistol and fired a rapid volley. The sharp *crack-crack-crack* echoed and re-echoed down the valley, as they stood waiting for the reverberations to return.

They heard nothing. There was only silence, except for the rising wind.

"They'll go the same way we're going," Fox said finally. "There's only one way *to* go. That's up. We'd better get started." His voice was lifeless, but his eyes glinted with anger.

Quickly they checked the gear that remained. Lambert found his medical pack intact, and handed around stress-caps. "Any idea how long it'll take us to get up there?" he asked.

"Too long," Fox growled.

"Well, these will be good protection—if we don't have to depend on them too heavily."

"I still don't see why we didn't see the ship blast," Lars said. "Could they have thrown it straight into Koenig drive without clearing the planet?"

"If they did, we're better off than they are, because they'd all be dead. They'd have disintegrated half the planet and blown themselves to atoms. No, Salter was a navigator. He knows you have to be in free space to use the drive."

"I still don't see how they could have blasted," Lars said doggedly.

"There's no point to arguing about it," Lambert cut in. "Its not there. All right. That cuts it pretty thin for us. We'd better make the best of what we've got."

Fox stared hard at Lars for a moment; then his face softened. "John's right," he said. "Sorry. I guess I just needed something to strike out at. All right—let's move."

They moved. They had no enthusiasm for it, but they realized that now was the time to make speed—while they still had warmth and food. They started up the trail toward the jutting ridge, Fox and Klein leading, Heldrigsson and Lambert behind. The wind was high now, bearing down on them as though to hinder progress as much as it could, and angry black clouds scudded across the bleak sky.

It took several hours of work to reach the lower summit of the crag that towered high above them, but finally they broke out on a high rounded knoll and could see the rising rock structures beyond. The crag extended up from

the far side of the river, where the stream of water coursed over it in a gigantic waterfall. But here there was a break in the obstructing wall. A jagged slide-course of boulders slanted up through a split in the cliff wall, reaching to a snow-covered plateau above. Far above this. as the clouds broke, they caught a glint of metal.

"It's bad," Fox said. "It'll take a day at least to get up that slide, if we can do it without breaking our necks. And then I'm not certain we can get onto those higher ridges that lead to the ship."

Jerry Klein studied the course with field glasses. "I've done some climbing back home," he said. "It looks barely possible from here. Of course, I don't know what it'll look like from up there."

"I wish we had Kennedy's films," Fox said.

"They wouldn't help much. It isn't the horizontal plane that worries me. It's the vertical. That's a vicious rise there."

"But it looks possible?'

"I think so.'

"Then let's move," said Commander Fox.

It was dark when they paused for rest and food. They were exhausted, and ravenous. They took half-rations, and felt as though they had eaten nothing. Then they tried to find comfortable places to sleep. It was hopeless. Lars dozed, jerking awake a dozen times as the hard rocks pushed through his heater suit. About midnight it began to snow, huge white flakes piling up on the dozing men, drifting against the rocks. Then Lars awoke to find his hands and toes numb with cold, and knew that his heater-pack was exhausted.

By daylight they were all shivering. The food warmed them a little, but it was nearly the last, and it was not enough. They stomped themselves warm in the snow, and peered up into the blustery greyness that lay above them.

"Let's move," said Fox.

With aching limbs they started on up the slide. The ventilated suits were a burden now. insulating them somewhat, but growing too warm as they climbed, chilling them to the bone every time they stopped. The whiteness around them grew thicker as they climbed, but Lars paid no attention to the surroundings. He kept his eyes on Jerry Klein's boots above him, and followed, step by step upward, as the trip began to dissolve into a series of nightmare impressions, fleeting thoughts, almost-hopeless hopes.

And over it all, the growing conviction that they were not alone on this planet, somehow—that somewhere alien eyes were watching, waiting—

On the fourth day they met the remainder of Lorry's group.

It was a sorry reunion. They met on a high ridge, where Fox and his group had fought for

hours to climb a series of rocky abutments. Tom Lorry spotted them from the other side of the ridge and shouted. Then he was running toward them, with Bob Kennedy at his heels. Behind came Marstom, the engineer. There were no others.

"Where are the rest?" Fox demanded when he had joined into a huddled group on the ridge.

"Three of them ran out," Lorry said breathlessly. "We all started up as soon as we found the ship gone, but Blair broke his ankle. I left him down below with Burger and all the food we had. They've got fuel, and some protection from the wind. We started on up then. How is your food supply?"

"It isn't," Fox said.

"Then let's get going. There's got to be food in that wreck."

They moved wearily upward again.

That night Kennedy began coughing, and so did Marstom. By morning both were feverish. Fox and Heldrigsson had frostbitten fingers which Lambert nursed back to warmth again. The wind was back, cold and biting, carrying drifts of sleet down the mountainside upon them. Lambert loaded both men with antibiotic, and distributed the rest of his stress-caps. They had lost sight of the wreck above them now; they were too close against the mountainside. But Klein thought he saw a way up.

"We can't take these men with fevers," Lambert protested.

"We can't leave them here. Maybe there'll be some shelter when we get up there, some food."

Both men agreed. Marstom had difficulty with his breathing as they started to hike again, but by stopping periodically he was able to keep up. Kennedy was wracked with coughing. They moved up one cliff face, then another. Only once that day did they see their goal; it still looked far off.

Then Heldrigsson started coughing, and began to feel the unnatural heat of fever in his cheeks. By the time light was visible, he felt groggy, stumbling forward with the others in a dim half-world of unreality.

They moved at infinitesimal speed—but they moved. A series of rock walls jutted up above them, vanishing into snow-clouds. Jerry Klein studied the wall, then began shinning up, wedging his feet into crevasses, seeking handholds, the coil of nylon cord over his shoulder. He vanished into the gloom as the others waited, not talking, not even looking up—just waiting. Then they heard his call, as the nylon swished wetly down to them, and they pulled themselves up, one by one.

Then they were on a snowfield —a high, narrow valley stretching up to the very summit of the

mountain beyond. Clouds scudded across, blotting out the peak, then revealing it again, and the snow was a fuzzy blanket as it fell. But across the snowfield was a crag that wasn't a crag, but the jets of a starship, dimly outlined, one fin raised in grey silhouette against the sky.

A cry went up, and Fox and Lorry started running through waist-deep snow, fighting their way toward the distant outline. Heldrigsson stumbled after them as Kennedy and Marstom fell to their knees, then scrambled up again in their eagerness. A cloud blotted out the view, but they had seen it now, *they knew it was there*. Half laughing, half crying, Lars stumbled after the dark figures of Fox and Lorry, leaving Lambert to catch up as best he could. Then, as if a signal had been given, the snow stopped and the obscuring cloud lifted.

They were very near the wrecked ship, near enough to see the detail, when Commander Fox stopped cold in his tracks, staring at her in stunned disbelief. Lorry stumbled forward, gripped Fox's shoulder, and pulled himself erect again, panting as he too stared. Something cold crept up Lars' spine. He stopped, blinking at the thing on the ridge ahead of him. It was a ship, a Star Ship, the goal they had fought so hard for.

But the ship didn't look right.

The lines were wrong, and it was too big. The part they could see rising up from the snowfield was not the full length of the hull, but only a fragment. It was a pile of wreckage, half-buried in silt and snow, disintegrating from the brutal weathering of many decades.

Lars rubbed his eyes, his mind denying what his eyes told him as he stumbled forward toward the wreck. It was an Earth ship, true, but it was *not* the *Star Ship Planetfall*. Barely legible letters on the windbeaten hull spelled out another name—the name of a ship that had left Earth over three hundred years before, taking its crew out bravely and blindly on the Long Passage.

The thing on the ridge was the wreck of the *Star Ship Argonaut*.

XI

FOR WHAT SEEMED an eternity they stood staring at the wraith before them, not moving, the only sound their own agitated breathing. Snow began falling again, lazily, spinning down in their faces, falling to form yet another layer of snow on the ancient wreckage.

Then Jerry Klein stumbled forward with a sob. He tripped over a buried piece of hull plate, dragged himself to his feet and reached out toward the dead, swinging airlock door. For an instant, he braced himself, staring in. Then with a clatter, the door

crashed off its hinges and he went reeling backwards.

"Nothing!" he cried. "There's nothing here. It's dead, *dead*—"

Recovering his balance, he slammed the hull with his fist, and it jerked and swayed dangerously. As Fox and Lambert ran forward, Klein ducked into the gaping lock. They could hear him crashing about inside like a man demented.

And then they were all moving about the decaying ship, hoping against hope that their eyes had been playing tricks on them, searching desperately for a sign of life—anything at all to restore their shattered confidence. They moved throughout the twisted wreckage numbly, like ghosts of a time long past, searching for something they could no longer hope to find.

When Fox at last turned to the others tears were streaming down his face. "Get those sick men on their feet, and get back on the rope again. We've got to go on."

Numbly, Heldrigsson and Lambert went back across the snowfield to the half-delirious Kennedy and Marstom. Their ship on the ridge had been a mirage—unexpected, relentless in its almost mind-shattering mockery of their desperate plight. No one had dreamed that it could be the wrong ship. But now they knew that it was. Somehow, missing its course in its valiant journey centuries before, the *Argonaut* had found another star, another planet—and a grave. What had happened? How long had the journey taken? Only the decaying wreckage knew the answer, and rusting metal has no life of its own.

They gathered around Walter Fox, Heldrigsson and Lambert supporting the sick men. Jerry Klein sat like a statue as a film of snow gathered on his arms and hands; Tom Lorry stood huddled near the wreckage, still staring, his face blank with exhaustion and despair.

Tom Lorry was the first to put into words what they all were thinking. "The *Planetfall* must be here too—somewhere. We found the food-bag. If it didn't crash here, what happened to it?"

"I don't know," Fox said.

"And what about our ship? Where did it go?"

"That's what we've got to find out," said Fox. "We'll get nowhere sitting here freezing. We've got to move on."

"What's the use?" said Marstom. He broke into a paroxysm of coughing, his thin shoulders shaking. "This is as good a place to freeze as any."

"You've forgotten the city in the valley," Fox said fiercely. "The city Kennedy saw. That valley is just over the ridge here. Kennedy saw *something*."

"There's nothing there," Marstom said wearily. "Kennedy was

under a strain—in an abnormal state. This is the end right here."

"Get up," said Fox. "We're going up there. Get on your feet—all of you."

Nobody moved. Lars Heldrigsson stared at the ground, his fingers numb, his whole body deathly tired. Marstom was right, he told himself despairingly. It was a lie, a delusion—that city in the valley beyond the ridge. This was the end, right here.

And then, Walter Fox was on his feet, cursing and shouting at them, his voice cutting like a whiplash. "You idiots!" he shouted. "Do you intend to just lie here and die?" He leaped on Jerry Klein, grabbed him by the collar and jerked him to his feet. "Get up, do you hear me? *Up,* on your feet. I'm still in command here, and as long as I'm in command I intend to be obeyed. You're not quitting on me! I'll drag you on my back first!"

Slowly, numbly, they began to move. Fox ran back and forth on the line, shouting at them, pounding them on the shoulder, dragging Klein to his feet when he stumbled and pushing him forward again as they moved out and away from the wreck.

What miracle of strength and vitality did such a man have? There was no clear answer, but dimly a flicker of understanding flared in Lars' mind: *He can lead because he has strength where strength failed in the rest of us.*

They moved, a sorry beaten line, past the wrecked ship, and on up the snowfield toward the low saddle of the pass before them.

And then, almost before they knew it, they were over the pass. Below them the valley lay, dark and imponderable before them, through the obscuring haze.

Dawn came silent and windless and grey. The snow had stopped, and an even thicker wall of fog descended, hiding all but the first lines of trees below the camping place. It was still cold, and there was no food, but the men felt at least half-alive as light began to show grayly from over the pass.

They had thrown caution to the winds when they had reached that sheltering place, and built a huge fire, warming themselves, drying their underclothes, drawing some element of life and hope from the yellow flames. And then they had slept, for the first time in days.

With morning came some degree of orientation. Because of the fog they could not see the valley below except for a few yards of grey slope directly beneath them. But they were sure that this was the valley where Kennedy had seen—or thought he had seen—a city. A city that human hands could not have built, Kennedy had said. It sobered their faces as they warmed themselves around the replenished fire.

Marstom's cough was now noticeably better, and Lars no longer felt the feverish heat in his cheeks. His eyes felt sore, and his bones ached, but he decided that mostly he felt hungry, and dirty, and tired.

Under Fox's relentless urging they moved down into the valley. Above and below them the fog grew thinner, breaking in patches to let through wavering streamers of orange light. More and more frequently Fox signaled a stop while he studied the grey mists with field glasses. There was no sound beyond the scrape of their boots, and yet the air seemed charged with tension as they continued on.

Suddenly they saw Jerry Klein stop, wave his hand violently and peer down the slope.

They froze in their tracks. The fog had broken, momentarily, and a strange brightness had appeared for the barest instant far below them.

"Did you see that?" Lambert asked Lars, his voice tense with strain.

"Yes, I saw something," Lars replied quickly. "I couldn't quite make it out."

"We'll stop here," Fox said. "Stay down. That fog bank is breaking. There's *something* damned unusual down there and we may be under observation."

Even as Fox spoke, Lars felt a breeze pass down the valley, ruffling the grass. Then quite suddenly the fog below them was gone and the sunlight streamed down, and they saw the whole valley to its farthest rim.

They stared, unbelieving, speechless.

When Lars described it later, he could recapture exactly the impression he got at the precise instant when the fog passed. It was as though they had been standing in a darkened theater, and suddenly and completely without warning the curtain had been raised to reveal an incredible stage, a glowing and fantastic wonderland. But now he stood rooted like the rest, not thinking, hardly able to comprehend the miracle in the valley far below.

It was a city they saw—there could be no question of that. Towers and spires rose one above the other, wildly, unbelievably, in utter defiance of gravity. The vista was a blaze of flickering color, a confusing, shifting, changing assemblage of buildings, arches, spires, bridges—tier upon tier of masonry rising skyward with no semblance of order or harmony, a colorful, incredible riot of architecture.

And as they watched, *the city changed.*

A glistening tower of blue shifted to glowing pink, became misty, spread and sank. Immediately in its place there appeared a needle-pointed spire. And almost at the

same instant a great curving bridgeway sprang up from one side, and moved swiftly in a graceful arch to the top of the spire. There was constant movement, constant change.

Lars rubbed his eyes, and heard Commander Fox's hoarse voice exclaiming, "It can't be. *It can't possibly be.*"

Lars knew what he meant. The colors, the spires, the shifting buildings, the tiny figures moving to and fro on the bridges and causeways were only a part of the unbelievable scene before them. The city in the valley was beyond human credibility.

It staggered them, and challenged their sanity, because the entire city, with no visible support of any kind, was floating gently two hundred feet off the ground.

Once when Lars had been very small, he had seen a travelling magician draw yard upon yard of brightly colored silk from a tiny vase the size of a thimble in his hand. That was the feeling he had now as he stared at the incredible city floating high above the valley floor. It couldn't be true—yet it was there before his eyes. When he closed his eyes and reopened them, it was still there.

He knew now why Kennedy had been so confused. He understood why Kennedy had insisted with no real hope of being believed that nothing human could have built such a city—

And yet something had built it.

"So these are your aliens," Lambert said as Fox lowered the field glasses from his eyes. "The messages from the *Planetfall* make complete sense now. They *did* contact an intelligent race here."

Fox said nothing. But his eyes were very bright as he stared at the city in the valley.

"But whatever they contacted destroyed their ship," Lambert continued.

"We don't know that!" Fox said at last. He looked from man to man. "We have to make completely sure. That means we have to go down there. But not all of us at once. I'll go alone, while the rest of you keep under cover."

"I'll go with you," said Lambert.

"You may be walking straight to your death," Tom Lorry cautioned.

"That's a chance I'll have to take. Keep covered—all of you." Fox nodded to Lambert. "Let's go."

Slowly, Fox and Lambert started down the slope. The sun was high, burning away the last vestiges of fog. Heldrigsson sat stonelike, gripping his knees as the two men disappeared behind a knoll of rock, only to reappear an instant later, moving further down the slope toward the city.

Then, suddenly they stopped. They appeared to be conferring.

They took a few more steps, and stopped again.

Something was wrong. Their steps seemed to be labored, as though they were wading through knee-deep mud.

"Can you see anything?" Marstom whispered.

Heldrigsson shook his head. "Something's holding them back. They're trying to hail the city."

"They're fools! They could be wiped out in an instant, without warning!"

"But nothing's wiping them out. They just aren't moving forward any more . . ."

It was true. The two men had turned back, and were moving more easily now. They turned again toward the valley, starting at a run, but almost instantly their footsteps slowed. Through the glasses Lars saw Fox bend down, and examine the ground minutely. Then the Commander moved forward alone, struggling to drag his feet until he came to a complete halt. He stood stock still, facing the city for a long moment. Then he turned back, rejoining Lambert, and together they trudged back up the slope to the party.

They were out of breath when they reached the waiting group.

"Can't do it," Fox said. "There's some sort of energy field—it's like slogging through waist-deep mud."

"Could you see anything?" Lorry asked.

"No sign that they've spotted us."

"Maybe I should try," said Lorry.

"Listen," Lambert said quietly.

There was silence as they blinked at him.

"Didn't you hear it?"

"I heard *something,"* said Lars suddenly. "Not a sound, but something—almost in my head."

"Yes, yes!" Lambert nodded. "I heard it down there, clearly. The exact words I couldn't understand."

" 'Let the boy come forth,' " Walter Fox said slowly.

"That was it!" said Lambert. "I'm sure of it."

"I heard it too, said Fox. "I can hear it now. 'Let the boy come forth.' "

"What boy?" Lorry asked. Then his eyes rested on Lars Heldrigsson.

Lars felt it now, deep within him, a frightening sensation, as if something were calling him, drawing him. "They want me," he said. "I don't know how they're doing it, but they want me."

"But that's impossible," Fox cried. "There's no sound—"

"I'd better go," Lars said. "Somebody's got to contact them. If they want me—I'll go. I guess I'm just young enough to seem still something of a boy to them."

He shifted his pack from his shoulders, straightened up to his full height. He was frightened,

but the thing in his mind that was calling him was not threatening. It was urgent, and powerful, and yet curiously gentle. He didn't even look at the others as he started down the path.

"Lars!" Walter Fox ran after him, and gripped his arm. "Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

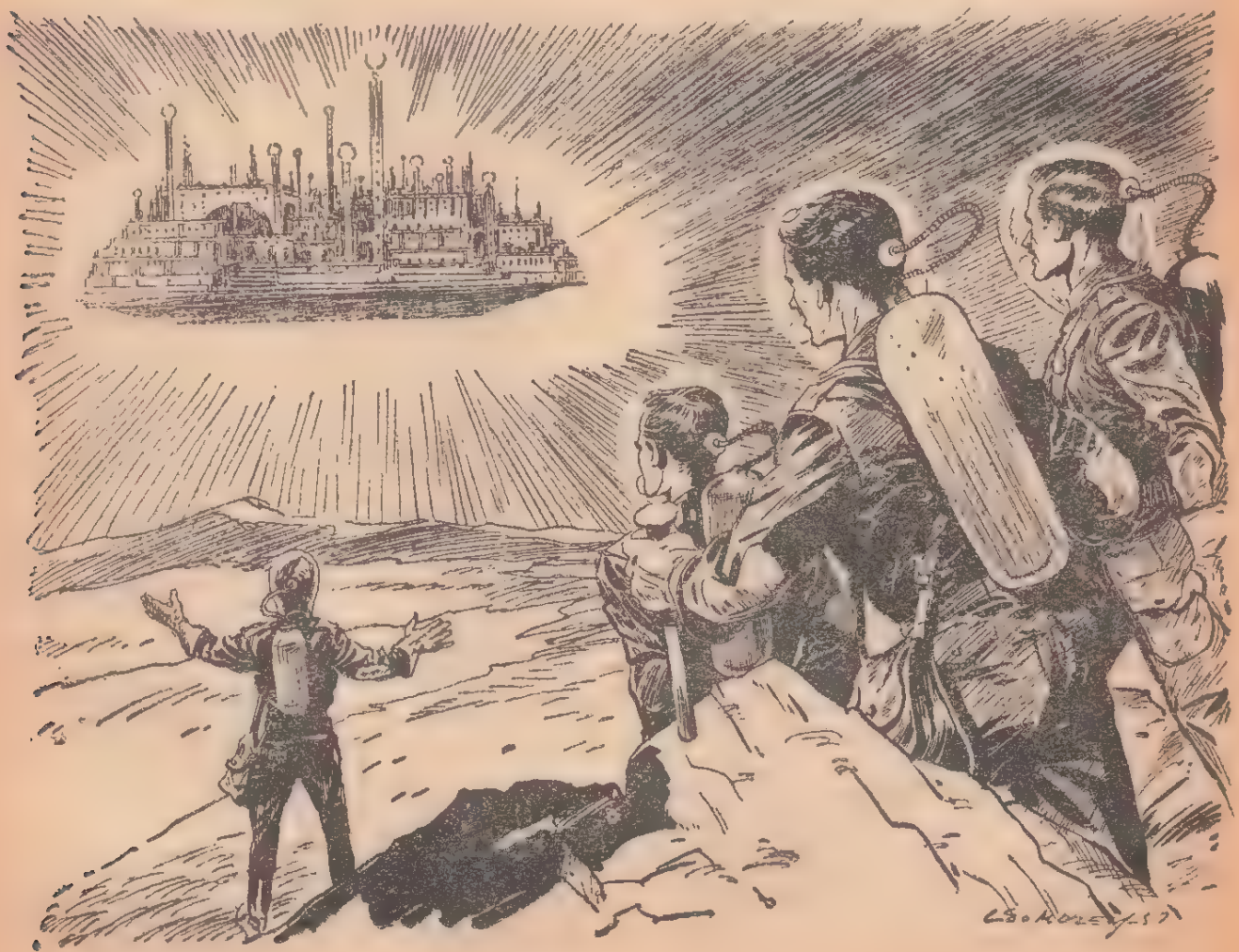
Lars blinked down at the Commander's weary face. Fox's voice was hoarse, his grey eyes pleading. It seemed to Lars that he had never really seen Walter Fox before. The iron-and-steel facade had melted away, and a kindly, sincere and humble man stood there, gripping his arm, begging him to listen.

"I've wanted this all my life," Fox was saying. "I knew we'd find it sometime. I've wanted so badly to find it—"

"Find it?" Heldrigsson shook his head in confusion.

"Men couldn't be alone in all this endless universe," Fox said. "Can't you see that? There had to be other creatures, *good* creatures who would—"

"What are you trying to say?"



"If you find them down there—*don't spoil it for us.* If they are good, trust them. Make them understand that we are good, too. At least, that some of us are. Offer them friendship. This is not the time for hate or fear or mistrust."

Lars nodded then. "I know," he said. "I'll try not to spoil it."

He started down the slope, leaving Commander Fox and the others watching. His eyes were fixed on the city as the towering buildings grew larger. He reached the valley floor, and stopped, and as he did so the urging deep in his mind increased. *They were watching him, waiting for him, eagerly.* He stepped out again as a cold edge of fear gnawed at his stomach. He clenched his fists at his side as he moved closer.

At first he thought that the buildings were growing larger, but then he realized that the city was dropping down to meet him. Gently, like a feather, it settled to the ground, and he could see bridges and buildings lined with tiny figures watching him. Ahead was a gate, high and luminous, shimmering as he drew nearer, until he was standing directly before it, a look of stark disbelief in his eyes.

The gate opened at his approach noiselessly, and the 'sounds' in his mind seemed to swell as he walked through. It became louder and louder, became for a moment like the babble of a thousand voices.

And then, inside, he heard a voice in his ear, a real voice so familiar that he whirled with a cry when he heard it, and came face to face with Peter Brigham.

XII

FOR HELDRIGSSON the shock of seeing Brigham was almost overwhelming. Like an island appearing in a sea of chaos: Peter Brigham. It was Peter, beyond any possible doubt. The gates had fallen open, and he had walked into a high-roofed, brilliantly lighted entranceway, with the strange city shifting and glowing before his eyes, and there was Peter—very much alive, and utterly unexplainable.

Heldrigsson had cried out in pure relief to see a familiar face, but now a flood of memories swept through his mind—confused, jumbled, only half-real. The despair he had felt when the deserters had bolted camp, marooning the rest of them on this alien land. The bitter struggle up the mountain-side to the wreck they had been sure was the *Planetfall.* And the almost unendurable despair that had taken possession of them immediately afterwards.

Brigham had deserted them. He had run out on them with Salter and Leeds and the rest.

"What are you doing here?" Lars cried. "What did you do with the ship? The others—where are they?" He stared at Brigham, his eyes blazing.

"Never mind—it doesn't matter right now. We may all be dead if you don't listen." There was urgency in Brigham's voice, unmistakable warning in his eyes. "Whatever you may think—I didn't run out on you. There isn't time to explain now. Later, if we're lucky. They'll be here any minute, so listen carefully. Close your mind as completely as you can. Make your mind a blank—try not to think of anything. Do it now, before they come, or they'll be picking your brain like a walnut. And don't be surprised at anything. Don't do anything to alarm them!"

Lars nodded once and fell silent. He didn't fully understand what Brigham was saying, but there could be no mistaking the urgency and dread in his voice. Whatever happened before could be settled in good time. There was a more immediate menace here, overriding everything else.

There was a sudden lull, as though thousands of people had taken a deep breath in unison and were expelling it slowly. The archway was breaking open, dissolving in brilliantly glowing particles as three figures moved down a ramp and came toward them. Lars had not seen them approach but suddenly they were there, as if they had materialized out of thin air. They reached Brigham and Heldrigsson in a moment, staring at Lars with unabashed curiosity as they paused directly in front of him.

They looked completely human. They were tall and slender, two men and a woman, moving with an easy grace that seemed very odd—until Lars noticed that their feet were hardly touching the ground. The woman had light hair; the men were dark, their faces guarded.

They showed no hostility, but their actions were as strange as their uncanny similarity to Earthmen in appearance. The woman reached out to touch Lars' clothes, to peer into his eyes questioningly, to rub a hand across his unshaven chin. Occasionally they paused in their examination.

Exactly like children examining a new toy—a toy they are a little afraid of, Lars thought. He glanced at Brigham, but Peter shook his head almost imperceptibly.

Finally Lars could stand the silent inspection no longer. "I'm an Earthman," he said in a voice that was too loud for the silence. "My name is Lars Heldrigsson. I'm one of the crew of a Star Ship that came from a planet called—"

He broke off sharply. The three City-people were paying no attention to his words. Brigham

shook his head again. "It won't do any good to talk to them," he said warningly. "They have no spoken language."

"But how do they—" Lars groped for the right word—"talk?"

"They've got a more advanced means of communicating than we have," said Brigham heavily. "How did you know they wanted you to come down here? It was Lars Heldrigsson they wanted,—none of the others. But how did *you* know that?"

Lars had no answer that made any sense. *I just knew it,* he thought. *My ears didn't hear anything, but they spoke to me just the same.*

How could he describe the eerie feeling that had struck him out there in the valley? As he tried to think of the right words, he felt the same feeling stirring again in his mind. Weary as he was, he felt himself growing tense. There was an abrupt, ridiculous mental picture of someone gently but firmly prying the lid off a coffee can—and then, suddenly, he knew that they were in his mind, probing with soft, feathery fingers. He felt their questions, although there was no sound, and they seemed to pick up his answers from his mind before they reached his tongue.

No wonder they don't talk! he thought wildly. *They don't need to talk!*

The woman looked at him in surprise. *Talk? What is 'talk'?* It came clearly, a direct question. All three City-people were looking at him in puzzlement.

Talk. Making sounds that mean what you are thinking. They snatched the answer before it came from his lips, and then looked at each other, still, puzzled. Abruptly they laughed. Apparently they didn't really understand what he meant at all.

The woman pointed a finger at him. *Who are you?*

An Earthman. I'm called Heldrigsson. Lars Heldrigsson.

Again puzzlement and confusion. *Earthman? Heldrigsson? Lars? Many thoughts in your mind, all mean you—*

I'm like him. Lars pointed to Peter Brigham.

They understood that, and it seemed to fill them with sudden eagerness and excitement. The men's impassive faces broke into smiles as they nodded to each other, and Lars caught the stream of thought as it passed between them;—*we were right, the two are indeed the same, then! It is good, good! Just as the Masters promised, sometime—*

Lars blinked. The Masters had not been a word, but a thought, a mental picture of greatness and inaccessibility and great reverence. It was almost as though the City-people had hushed their thought-voices as they mentioned the name, and bowed their heads

gently. *Yes, it is just as the Masters promised—*

And then the woman was looking at him closely. Like the others, she was dressed in a formless grey cloak of feathery soft material, and her hair seemed to shimmer in the light from the walls. She was very beautiful, her face childlike and yet gentle, her eyes grey and wide spaced. *Then you come like all the others, from—* She seemed to grapple for a picture that was beyond her capabilities.

From another star, Heldrigsson thought. *From a planet called Earth, third from the sun—*

Sun?

Our star. We call it Sol. Far away—

Away? What is that?

From another land, not this world at all.

But you must be weary, coming so far.

Heldrigsson stared. She was picturing him walking. *We came in a Star Ship, the Ganymede—*

Confusion again. *Why did you do that?*

To find another Star Ship that was lost here.

But why do you use these—Star Ships?

Now it was Lars' turn to be puzzled. He turned to Brigham. "I think I'm missing something somehow."

Brigham nodded. "I've been on the same treadmill for days. They

just can't conceive of any other world but this planet. They don't know what you mean about 'another world' and 'across space' and things like that. They can't seem to grasp what a Star Ship is used for, or why anyone would need to use one."

Once again Lars tried to convey the idea of crossing depths of space enclosed and propelled and protected by a shell of metal and plastic, but it was useless. He was so weary he could hardly keep his thoughts straight, and this incredible means of conversation was quickly wearing away his last vestige of control.

"Look, can't they get me something to eat, or let me wash up and get some sleep or something?" he burst out to Brigham.

"Go ahead and ask them," said Peter. "Give them a good sharp mental picture of what you want, and how tired you feel, and what you'd like right now."

Lars tried it. He conjured up an image of weariness and hunger that would have torn the heart out of a statue, and visualized a steaming hot shower and a clean warm bed. To his amazement the three City-people caught the images perfectly. A rush of sympathy and apology poured from their minds. *We are tiring you—and you need rest. Come, we will make you comfortable. Later we will—talk.*

"But what about the others?" Lars said aloud. "They have no food—Kennedy and Marstom are sick. And there are two others down on the other side of the mountain."

"They're here," Brigham said quickly. "The others will be brought in—don't worry. Just come along now."

Lars needed no further urging. He followed the strange people into the city.

It was not until then that Lars got a good look at the city. There were gaudy arches and glistening spires, and sweeping walkways moved between the buildings that hung individually in the air—some substantial—looking, almost granite-like in construction and others more like iridescent blocks spinning slowly through the air. The city seemed not to have been architecturally planned. It hung there willy-nilly, yet in its very disorganization there was a wild incredible sort of beauty. There was a complete absence of ugliness. There was no dirt, no greyness.

The City-people were everywhere, thronging the walkways and arches, moving up over the sweeping curves of bridges, and everywhere the buzz of activity and life washed over Heldrigsson like a wave. Some of the men were very old with long beards and white hair; others quite young and yet with the same peculiar young-old appearance that the

woman who was leading them had shown. An occasional woman passed with a pink baby in her arms, and a string of youngsters fell in behind them, watching with great curiosity as they moved through the winding streets.

Their method of travel was also confusing. They started off walking—or so it seemed to Lars—yet they seemed to cover great distances with very little effort in the briefest imaginable time. One instant they were moving up on an arching bridge and the next moment the bridge would be behind them. Heldrigsson shook his head sharply and looked at Brigham in confusion.

"You'll get used to it," Peter said. "They're only 'walking' in deference to us."

"How do they usually get around?"

"I'm not sure what you'd call it. You know the tricks some of the teleps back home use—putting a ball in a box, and then making it pop through without opening the box? It seems to be pretty much on that order. They want to go somewhere, and almost instantly, there they are! They took me out that way once, and I was sick all over everything. Since then they've slowed down to a fast run for me."

They had been moving toward a long, low building of pale blue color, floating high above the majority of the buildings. This one had a crystal spire that rose a hundred feet in the air and sparkled like an icicle in the sunlight. Now, even as Lars watched, they were suddenly inside the building in a long sloping corridor. It seemed to be a library or lounge. Along one side curving sheets of plastic material stood near the wall, with a bank of control buttons at the side.

A closer look revealed them to be viewing plates, for one of them was glowing a dull blue. But there was no image, that Lars could see, on the screen. Quite abruptly the blue screen flickered and blinked out, becoming dull grey like the rest.

"Our 'study'," Brigham said softly. "We have living quarters at the end there."

They approached the end of the corridor, where a tall thin door-like slab lay against the pale green wall. Its fluted edges were visible, clinging to the wall, and there was no knob. The three City-people stopped, looking around at Lars. Once again he felt the feathery flutter of their thought-fingers in his mind. *For you. Your quarters. You will find food and sleeping clothes inside.*

He nodded, and waited for them to open the door, but nothing happened. The three were watching him closely.

"They want you to open the door," Brigham whispered.

"But there's no knob!"

They only waited a moment as Lars stared helplessly at the door. Then he felt, rather than heard, a tiny sigh from the City-people. The woman touched the door with her finger, and almost instantly it dissolved into mist. Then it vanished, revealing a large comfortable room beyond. Lars stepped in, still feeling the wave of disappointment in the City-peoples' minds, and the fragments of thought: *He is like the other. But perhaps with lessons he too—the Masters warned it would be hard.*

And then Heldrigsson and Brigham were in the room, and the door had reappeared, leaving them alone. To one side was a bath, with hot water running and sending up heart-warming clouds of steam; there were two beds, soft and inviting, though they were really only pallets floating three feet off the ground. And near the beds two trays of food that made Lars' mouth water from across the room.

They were in their quarters. Prisoners? It would seem so—and yet the three City-people had no hostility in their minds. On the contrary, there had been a haunting aura of deference as they had probed his mind, as though he were not a prisoner so much as an honored and somehow very important guest. There had been a sense of eagerness as they had examined him, of watchfulness and hopefulness.

And that strong last impression, rising again to Lars' mind: *Perhaps with lessons—*

He saw the hot water, the beds, the food, but there was something even more important first. He turned to Brigham. The city and the people were like a fantastic dream—but Peter was no dream. Peter Brigham was Peter Brigham, human flesh and blood. A rested, warm, well-fed Peter Brigham who, for all his urgent warning, did not seem to be too much afraid of these people. Indeed, he seemed to accept them very calmly. If there was something hazy and unreal about the aliens, there was nothing hazy about Peter, nor about the things that Lars knew were true:

There had been a Star Ship named *Ganymede* which had brought them there—he and Brigham and twenty other Earthmen.

Peter Brigham had joined the deserters to seize the ship, and had somehow managed to spirit it from its landing-site.

A Star Ship the size of the *Ganymede* does not just vanish into thin air, on Wolf IV or any other place.

Sometime, many months before, another Star Ship named *Planetfall* had made a landing on Wolf IV, and had also vanished.

Lars turned to Brigham. "All

right—the food will wait. I want some answers, and I want them right now."

"They'll make more sense when you're rested up," Brigham told him.

"I think they'd better make sense right now," Lars said. *"Where are those ships? Where are the men?"*

With a sigh, Brigham walked across the room. As he approached the far wall, it began to fade away, just as the door had, revealing a wide panorama of the city below them.

"Come here," said Brigham. "I can answer one of your questions without any trouble at all."

Heldrigsson approached the window. The bright lights of the city caught his eyes like a display of fireworks.

"You're right," Brigham said slowly. "The *Ganymede* didn't vanish into space—and nobody lifted it off the planet, either." He pointed. "Down there, on the ramp."

Heldrigsson gasped.

It was a more substantial structure than the others in the city, heavy and solid, forming two long narrow cradles. And in the cradles were two long Star Ships, almost twins, lying side by side.

Lars would have recognized the *Ganymede* anywhere. He had never seen the other ship before, but he knew without question that it was the *Planetfall*.

This, then, had been the end of her journey.

XIII

BRIGHAM WAS gone when Heldrigsson finally awoke. He did not know how long he had slept, for when he had crawled into the bed he had been too weary even to check his chronometer. He looked quickly about the room, concern shocking him into wakefulness. There was no sign of Brigham, but the table was set with food.

It didn't resemble any food he had ever seen before, but the piquant texture and taste removed any lingering suspicion of its quality. Nothing could taste so good, and not be nourishing. There was a plate of meaty-tasting stuff, some spicy soup, and what he took to be vegetables, in spite of their pale blue color. The plates refilled automatically as he ate, although no one entered the room and when he was finally filled, the food, table and all, vanished, leaving only a faint pleasant odor in the air.

This off-again-on-again business made Lars uneasy. He got up and walked about the room, inspecting the smooth material of the walls, and watching the large window grow transparent as he moved near it. The two ships still lay in their racks below, as though they had been there for years. But the sight of them

sharply recalled every one of the thousand unanswered questions in his mind.

He experienced a slight easing of tension when he heard Peter's voice, and saw him walking in through the door, which had become so thin and gauzy that it barely concealed the study-room beyond.

"About time you were stirring," Brigham said.

"Where have you been?"

"Having my lessons."

"What lessons?"

"You'll see, I think," Brigham said. He glanced through the window. "Oh, they're still here," he affirmed reassuringly, nodding to the ships. "They're not going anywhere."

"But where are the crews?" A frightening thought struck Lars. "These people haven't—*assimilated* them somehow, have they? I mean, dug around in their minds until they were picked clean, and then—"

"No, no, nothing like that," said Brigham. "The crew of the *Planetfall* is in the same place as the crew of the *Ganymede,* with the sole exceptions of you and me." There was a note of resignation and hopelessness in Brigham's voice.

"Where is that?" Lars asked, his mouth suddenly dry.

"In a special vault they've built for them in the depths of the city."

"You mean they've killed them?"

"Oh, no—they're not dead. They're asleep. They've been fed and cared for ever so carefully, but they're kept sleeping, and as far as I can determine, these City-people have no intention in the world of waking them up, ever. That's why I warned you to go easy until we saw how they received you—because I've got a hunch that if they decide to put us to sleep, nobody is ever going to wake us up."

"Wait a minute," Lars said, confused. "I left Commander Fox and Lambert and the others up on the hillside. They couldn't even get close to this place."

"They're here now. I doubt if they ever got a look at the inside of the city. I think they were put to sleep before the City-people brought them in. But I don't know any way to tell that for sure."

Lars stared at Brigham, then walked over to the window again. "You still haven't told me how you got here—or how the ship got here, for that matter."

Brigham shrugged. "They brought us here. Don't ask me how, because I can't tell you."

"But you bolted that night with Salter and Mangano!" Lars accused.

"Not because I wanted to, believe me. I never dreamed that

Salter would try to make a break for it so soon."

"Then it *was* planned in advance."

"Of course it was planned in advance," Brigham said irritably. "You people went around that ship after the showdown with Fox acting as though you thought if you didn't look at it maybe it would just go away. Salter and his pals were planning a break with the ship from the minute the mutiny fell through. They didn't cut me in on it until we were actually organizing the landing party, and then they only told me to be on my toes when the time came. They had no intention of running into any aliens on Wolf Four. They thought that the landing parties would leave the ship under a light guard, and that they could break away and seize it, and then head out. Which was what they did, up to a point."

"And when they got back to Earth?"

"No problem. Who'd be there to argue any story they told? The Colonial Service would have to believe them."

"So they planned to murder or maroon anyone that didn't go along with them," said Lars bitterly.

"Now you're getting the picture," said Brigham. "I got just an inkling of it—Salter was still sore that I didn't vote with him before—and I hoped I could spot the trouble and tip off the rest of you when the time came. Trouble was, it came too soon. Salter moved as soon as the rest of you were asleep, and I had the choice of going along quietly or taking a bullet in the head. I chose the former. I thought even at that I might be able to break away and warn the men on the ship."

"So that was how it was," Heldrigsson said slowly. Suddenly, he felt as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He had not realized how much Brigham's desertion had hurt—not because of treachery to the ship and its crew, but very personally. He couldn't believe that Brigham had done what he had done willfully.

"I'm glad it was that way," he said. "I'm really glad."

"You thought something else, maybe?"

"I—didn't know what to think."

"I suppose it must have looked pretty bad. Oh, I know I've acted like a fool about some things on this trip—but I wasn't ready to join this scheme, believe me. I felt pretty dirty helping Salter and Leeds get those boats across the river, and then cutting them loose. And of course, when we got back to where the *Ganymede* had landed, it was gone, and I didn't have a chance to sound an alarm after all."

"Gone!" said Lars. "You mean you didn't move it at all?"

"It wasn't there to be moved. You should have seen Jeff Salter's face! It would have made you feel lots better about that trip over the mountain. He'd figured it was all smooth as oiled silk from then on out, and then *whammo*—no ship.

"We were in as bad shape as the ones we'd run out on. Only Salter wasn't exactly the leader type. It scared him silly when we came down and found that ship gone. He was all over the place, sending us out to scour the area—he thought we might have missed the way—but scared to wait by himself for fear something would jump on him from the woods."

"But what did happen?" asked Lars.

"We went over to the place where the ship had been, and began looking around for it, and then—just like that—we weren't *there,* any more, but *here.* In the city. In a room with a dozen aliens, stripped of our weapons—I still haven't found out what they did with our machine-pistols—and every single one of the men dead asleep except me."

"Except you," Lars repeated.

"That's right."

"First you—then me. Why?"

"You find me the answer for that, and we'd be on our way out of here," Brigham said grimly. "I don't know why, and the City-people here either can't—or won't—tell me."

"Coincidence?" said Lars.

Brigham snorted. "Do you think so?"

"But what else? What have they been doing with you?"

"Giving me lessons."

"Lessons. Yes, I know, I'll find out." Lars threw his hands up in disgust. "Look—lessons mean teaching, right? *What are they trying to teach you?*"

"I've been trying to find that out ever since they started. I haven't an inkling. But I know one thing. From the minute I turned up in this city, the City-people have been trying to teach me *something,* with every technique and resource at their disposal." Brigham grinned. "So chew on that for a while."

"Can you show me around this place—or are we locked in?"

"We're free as the wind—except at lesson-time," said Brigham wryly.

"Then show me around a bit."

They left the quarters and started out on a tour of the remarkable city, Brigham with a firm step, Heldrigsson walking cautiously lest the airy structure of the place should suddenly tumble down upon them like a house of cards. They walked across a high bridge from their building (which Lars could have sworn was not there when they

had first come) and around a long circular staircase down toward the ground. The end of the staircase was twenty feet up, so that it appeared that they must turn around and come back, but as they neared the end, the building, staircase and all, obligingly drifted down to firm ground for them.

Lars shook his head uneasily. Once again he felt the wash of thoughts from the people of the city, a steady, never-ending hum, very similar to the hum of the Koenig-drive engines he could remember in the *Ganymede*.

"This is what gets me," Lars said, pointing to the staircase, which was rising up again. "This business of now-it's-one-place-now-another. I see it, but I can't quite bring myself to believe it."

"It's the way they live," Brigham said. "Your bed last night—was it comfortable?"

"Perfectly."

"Good and steady? It didn't lurch around when you crawled in?"

"No, it was steady enough."

"Well, have you figured out what held it up, yet?"

"No."

"I don't think you will, either, because *nothing* was holding it up. This city and everything in it is instantly adaptable to whatever whim happens to strike the individuals who live here. They don't *do* these things—they just *want* them done."

"Then these things are a result of extra-sensory powers?" Lars asked incredulously.

"Of course it's extra-sensory power! But it's refined far beyond anything you ever saw. With these people it's utterly unconscious. It's telepathy, telekinesis, teleportation, anything you want to call it, developed into a fine art. Their whole culture and civilization is based on it. You notice what a hodgepodge this city is?"

Lars nodded. "It looks as though the city planner was out to lunch when they drew up the plans."

"There wasn't any city planner. These people arrange things strictly to suit themselves. They can move a single molecule or the side of a mountain, individually or collectively, just by deciding that they want it moved. Their city floats when they want it to, or sits on the ground when they want it to. If they get bored with one kind of house, they rearrange it into another kind. Since they move almost entirely by teleportation, their doors and windows are ninety percent decoration. That's why you see doorways like that."

Brigham pointed to an oval-shaped building they were passing with pale orange doorways shaped like tall slender triangles.

"But what do they live on?"

Lars asked. "How do they grow crops on this barren place."

"That's just it—they don't need to grow crops! There's plenty of plant and animal life on the planet, with plenty of protein, and fat, and carbohydrate molecules on hand. They simply rearrange them into palatable combinations when they get hungry.

"I suppose if they chose to, they could start with sub-atomic particles and work themselves up a genuine Montana beef steak. if they knew what one was. And of course they have no need of surface or air transportation vehicles, and there's no weather problem, when they can just drive a storm away by wishing it somewhere else." Brigham grinned at Lars. "They do just that, and more."

"By ESP," said Lars.

"By ESP."

They moved on through the maze of buildings. "Can you show me the ships?"

"Afraid not. They're forbidden. They don't want us near them."

"How about the place where the men are—sleeping?"

"Well, I've seen them there, and maybe after you're here a while we might risk a look. Right now, I don't think we should do anything to ruffle them."

"I suppose not." Lars shook his head. "The thing that bothers me the most about this whole thing is how much those City-people look like humans. They've got *fingerprints*—did you notice? And their skin, and their hair, their musculature—I couldn't tell the difference, unless I looked at their faces, and *then* I couldn't be sure."

"I know exactly what you mean," Brigham said grimly. "The resemblance is more striking every time you see them close up. In fact, for my money, the resemblance is too striking."

"What do you mean?"

I mean that I'd swear by everything I believe in that *these people are Earthmen!*" Brigham made an uneasy gesture. "It's just about driving me crazy. They *look* like Earthmen, but they don't begin to act like them. They're like children. Their whole life revolves on this extra-sensory control of things, and yet they have no sense of logic whatever. Their minds are totally alien. They have no concept of science, or of machinery, or anything else.

"In fact, they don't know about anything outside this city and this planet, and they don't care—or didn't until now. I'm certain that they honestly don't know what we *mean* when we tell them we come from another planet of another star. But who are they? Where do they come from?"

"Have you asked them?" Lars said.

"I've asked them until I was black in the face. I might as well not have bothered. They didn't even understand the question."

They moved about the city until the sky began to darken, and then turned back to their quarters. As they walked through the corridor with the view-screens, Lars stopped short.

"Hold it," Heldrigsson said. "I thought you said they had no concept of science or mechanics. How did they get those things?"

"That's a good question," Brigham said. "Try one once, and see what you think."

Lars sat down before one of the grey screens. There were no switches—only a bank of buttons on the wall near the screen. "How do you work it?"

"Punch any combination of five buttons," said Brigham.

Lars pushed five buttons at random. Abruptly the screen leaped into life with the pale blue color he had seen before. There was a flickering geometric pattern, but no image Lars could recognize. "Now what?"

"Just watch it a minute," Brigham said with a little half-smile.

Lars watched. At first there was nothing. Then, gradually, he noticed a tingling in his fingers and toes, and he had a growing feeling of being *elsewhere*. Vague ideas were passing through his mind as he stared hypnotically at the screen—half-formed thoughts, hazy pictures, meaningless and yet clearly present.

He felt his scalp crawl. It was not a story. There were no characters, nothing but a series of impressions, changing slowly, drawing him in, sweeping him away in a stream of turbulent activity. He didn't understand what was happening, but suddenly he was sailing aloft, seeking, restless, forgetting himself and the city around him, forgetting everything in his absorption of the moment. And then the other-worldly sensation faded; the screen darkened, and he blinked at Brigham and the room snapped back into focus before his eyes. He stared at the screen wonderingly.

Brigham grinned. "Exciting, eh?"

"I—wouldn't exactly say *that*."

"Very informative."

"No, certainly not informative." Lars scratched his head. "Not entertaining, either. Just—different. What is it?"

Brigham shrugged. "To these City-people, what you just saw was a history text—or the closest they have to recorded history. I've all but dismantled one of these gadgets, and it doesn't make any sense at all. There's no power source, nor any storage relays for films. There are no wire connections to a book-tape library anywhere. In fact, I can't see any

reason at all why those screens should work—and yet they do."

"And that was *history* I just saw?"

"Oh, they have a word-of-mouth sort of history. Maybe I should say 'word-of-mind.' A jumble of legends and superstitions. The trouble is, no two versions of anything ever seem to agree. If they get stuck they refer you to these screens, as though that would explain anything that was confusing. Yet I'd swear that these City-people never made the screens."

They walked through the filmy door into the quarters. "Who did, then?" asked Lars.

"I don't know. Their superstitions seem to revolve around a group of gods that these people revere, and stand in awe of."

"You mean the ones they call 'The Masters'?"

"Yes. I get the impression that these — Masters — were once among them, but departed long ago, for parts unknown. The people hold them in great esteem and affection. They keep referring to them as 'the Masters that fed us and taught us.' But whether there ever were such creatures, or what they were, nobody seems to know. They just tell the stories, endlessly, like children reciting nursery rhymes, except that the stories are never the same twice."

"But there must be something we can get hold of," Lars said in exasperation.

Brigham was silent for a moment. Then he said: "What did you find up on the mountain ridge? What was the wreck that we saw in Kennedy's pictures?"

Lars told him. Brigham stared. "The *Argonaut!* You mean the Earth ship that took the Long Passage?"

"That's right."

"But it's been lost for centuries."

"It isn't lost any more. It crashed up there."

"That's very strange," said Brigham, "because one of the few things I am sure of about these people is that they know about that wreck up there, and they're afraid of it."

"Afraid of it?"

"They never go there. It's a 'forbidden place.' They can't say why, or won't. They don't even want to talk about it. Which is particularly odd when you consider that they haven't the least fear—nor interest in—the two ships here in the city. They don't want us to go near them, but they aren't afraid of them."

"Anything else that you're sure about?" Lars asked. "I mean, we might as well cover the board while we're at it."

"Just one thing," said Brigham. "The City-people are desperately afraid of the crewmen of both ships!"

"But I thought you said they were asleep."

"They are. But the people are still afraid of them. They take care of them as if they were fusion bombs approaching critical. The thought of wakening them literally scares the City-people out of their wits."

Lars thought that over. "But they aren't afraid of us!" he protested. "I mean you and me. Or at least, if they are, they hide it pretty well. This gets crazier and crazier every minute, and we always seem to slam up against the same brick wall. Exactly what is so special about you and me?"

But they had no answer to that question. Food had appeared as they were talking, and they settled down glumly to eat. "They'll be coming to give you your first lesson when we're finished," Brigham said. "Maybe you'll have some brilliant ideas along the way. I sure haven't had any."

"But there's nothing—" Lars protested.

"There has to be something that's important to them that we just can't see," said Brigham. "But what it could be is beyond me. I hate to admit that I'm whipped, but I've got no choice on this one."

"There's only one thing," Lars said.

Brigham stopped with his food halfway to his mouth. "What?"

"Oh, nothing," Lars muttered in disgust. "We're different from the rest of the crew in one way, but I don't see how it could make much difference."

"What are you talking about?"

"Our ages," said Lars. "It's the only imaginable thing that could distinguish us from the rest of the crewmen in the eyes of these strangers—that could make us any different from Commander Fox, or Lambert, or Salter, or any of the others."

"You mean—"

"Yes," said Lars. "Both of us are young."

XIV

IT WAS SO obvious, and yet so ridiculous, that they both were incapable of speech for an instant. It had been there staring them in the face from the first—yet it made no sense at all.

"But it's true," Lars said, flushing. "We're both under twenty-five. The next youngest man on the crew is Mangano, and he's twenty-nine."

"Maybe they figure we'll be the tenderest for roasting," said Brigham.

"Well, why not?"

"It doesn't add up to anything, that's why," said Brigham.

"Neither does anything else around this place—to us. But obviously it adds up to the City-people, or they wouldn't make a

distinction like this. What other difference can you suggest?"

Heldrigsson rose from the meal. He walked over to the window, and stared out across the city. The sky was dark now, but the bright lights of the buildings made it seem like daylight outside. "The way I see it, we've been tripping over everything in sight, and losing track of the one thing that we've just got to remember: that there are answers to this whole business. There must be answers—simple ones. We can't see how, but somehow the pieces must fit together."

"I wonder," said Brigham.

"Look, we'll think of something. Can you brief me on these lessons a little bit?"

Brigham shook his head. "I'd be wasting my breath. And anyway, there isn't time. Here they come now."

The woman and one of the men who had met Heldrigsson at the gate had suddenly appeared at the door to their quarters. It was the first Lars had seen of them since he had arrived, but now he felt a much different kind of apprehension than he had then. *At least,* he thought, *I'm rested and fresh now. They won't catch me off guard—*

They picked it up, and glanced gravely at each other. The woman shook her head. *We are glad you are rested, but you must not fight us. There is much you must learn.*

What must I learn? Lars shot at them.

We must teach you what the Masters taught us, of course. She shook her head again, cutting off the question rising to his lips. *Come. We will work out here.*

It was the strangest kind of lesson Heldrigsson had ever had in his life. They placed him before one of the grey view-screens, but they did not activate it at first. Almost at once he felt their probing thought-fingers in his mind.

First you must understand that there is no harm, no pain. We will not hurt you. It was the woman, who seemed to have taken charge, with the man merely observing.

Lars felt his muscles grow tense. *What are you going to do?*

There is nothing we can do but enter your mind and guide you, just as the Masters taught us. It is you who must do the work. She was gentle, but Lars could sense the unyielding firmness behind the gentleness.

What work? What do you want me to do?

It was like conversing with a deaf-mute boy he had known years before. The lad could read lips, but could not hear a sound. It had not taken Lars long to learn to speak to him soundlessly, forming his words carefully with his lips only. And now, similarly,

he was forming his words in thoughts only.

More City-people had joined the girl at his side and he felt a shock as they probed deeply, searching the farthest reaches of his mind. He had an eerie feeling, almost like nausea, for a moment. It was like the first downward lurch of an elevator, or the initial shock of free-fall in space —not exactly unpleasant, but unsettling.

Then he felt a sense of buoyancy, of soaring high in the air, free of gravity, free of restrictions of space and time—almost the sensation he had felt at the viewscreen earlier. And now he saw that the screen was glowing faintly! The City-people glanced at each other excitedly, urging him on, but his mind rebelled. He felt himself jerk up like a tightly-reined horse. The girl and one man seemed to be doing most of the questioning.

No, no! It was the woman, urgent, appealing. *Let yourself go.*

He relaxed for a moment, felt himself breaking free of control again. But this time he was prepared and reined himself in sharply, fighting down the weird sensation.

No, no, please—you must help us, not fight us.

But I don't like it. I can't let myself go. Lars felt the half-nausea again, and it seemed as though his whole body was drained of strength. *I don't like it, I tell you.*

But there is no harm.

I still don't like it. Lars felt trapped, helpless against the power of these two minds. *What are you trying to do? What is the purpose of this?*

Amazement from the woman, as though he had suddenly slapped her face. *To teach you, of course. We don't want to frighten you.*

Teach me what?

It was full circle again. The woman and man exchanged grim glances. *The same as with the other one. Blocking, fighting, trying his best to avoid—*

It frightens him. This from the woman. *Can it be that they don't know.*

They must. The Masters said it, and they must know it is true.

Once again Heldrigsson caught the wave of reverence, and esteem, and love surrounding the impression of 'the Masters.' But there was no mental picture, no concept of shape, or size, or origin, or likeness. And yet the impression was there, a very real entity. Lars groped, trying to understand the impression, but the woman shook her head. *You are tired. That is enough for today. Tomorrow we will try again.*

Wait! Lars leapt to his feet.

There's something I want to know.

The woman paused, questioningly.

The others. Where are the others who came with me?

A wave of fear, faint but unmistakeable. Something became guarded in the woman's eyes. *They are safe. They are sleeping.*

Then wake them up.

Never! Sharp fear flared in her eyes. *No, no, they must remain asleep.*

I don't believe you. I don't think they're here. Lars watched their faces closely, groped with his mind to catch their response. *I think you've killed them.*

No, no! We could never have done that. The Masters would be angry.

Then take me to them. Show me. Prove that they're still alive.

There was a sound in the door, and Lars saw Brigham standing there, watching, his eyes wide. "What are you doing?"

"I told them we want to see the others," Lars snapped. He turned back to the woman. *Take both of us. Both of us want to see.*

The City-people stood transfixed, fear very strong in their minds. Then Lars sensed the shadow of a sigh, a breath of resignation, as the man made a weary gesture with his hands. *All right. We will show you. Come.*

They were afraid. They tried to shield their fear, but Heldrigsson could feel it, like an ugly grey blanket, wrapping their thoughts as they led the way down into the vault. They were afraid with an overwhelming, uncontrollable fear. Lars and Brigham followed, white-faced, feeling an almost unbearable apprehension themselves as they moved through corridors and down darkened stairways.

Something caught in Lars' mind, and he looked sharply at Brigham. "How did you know what I was doing when I asked to come down here? I didn't make a sound."

"I know. I felt it. I couldn't tell what, exactly, but I knew you'd hit them with something."

They finally reached a long, darkened room, far down in the depths of the city. Along both walls of the vault were sleeping pallets, floating off the floor. On each pallet was a sleeping man.

Heldrigsson stared at the figures. Suddenly he felt very cold. They were breathing slowly; some were muttering in their sleep. Occasionally one moved an arm or a leg. Down the right hand side he could see John Lambert, snoring gently. Commander Fox slept beside him. On the far side was Jeff Salter.

You see? All sleeping. All safe. Lars caught the woman's thought, but he also felt the wave of fear emanating from her mind,

twisting into his thoughts like an icy finger. Then she turned sharply, almost out of control, and led them up stairs into the cool, pleasant corridor above.

Lars was not sorry to leave the darkened vault. It had been a ghastly sight—but at least his companions were there, alive, sleeping. *Why have you done this?* Lars thought sharply. *Why are you so afraid of them?*

But don't you see? They would destroy us. The Masters warned us about the danger.

Who are the Masters?

The woman blinked at him, not comprehending. *The Masters are—the Masters. Who else?*

Are they here? In the city?

Oh, no. They left long ago. They have never returned. But when the time is right they will. Oh, they will.

Lars caught the flush of excitement in Brigham's eyes. *But the Masters left you orders you have to obey. Is that right?*

Orders? Obey? The Masters knew what was right. Why should we need orders to obey? The woman's confusion was growing. *Surely you understand—it was the Masters who fed us and taught us. Why should we need orders to obey? They know what is right.*

And then Lars saw the question that had to be answered. He looked straight at the woman and put all his power into the query. *What were you before the Masters came?*

For the barest instant Lars felt her fear, the shadow of doubt flitting through her mind, as as though he had opened a door long closed, aroused some timeless, shapeless fear. But then the door closed again, leaving only puzzlement and confusion.

But the Masters never came. They were always here. And we were always here.

Like a phonograph record arranged to play over and over and over, Lars thought. Each question added confusion, each answer seemed to take them farther away from the answers they sought. He turned to Brigham, shaking his head.

"Let's go back," he said. "That's about as much of this as I can stand, for one day."

It was Brigham who finally broke the deadlock, though in quite a different way than he had imagined.

Day had followed day among the City-people with no appreciable change. Every day both Heldrigsson and Brigham had two and even three sessions with their tutors, but always the mental block remained. If anything the City-people and their reasons for singling out the youngest crewmen became more incomprehensible than ever as the two saw more of the workings of the city.

Then one day, when a lesson

was about to be finished, Brigham flashed a thought question without warning at the woman who was working with him. *What would happen if the sleepers were to awaken?*

Again he felt the wave of fear from her mind. *Oh, no! It must not happen.*

But suppose it did?

We would be destroyed forever.

But Peter Brigham and I are not sleeping, and you have not been destroyed. Why didn't you put us to sleep too?

She stared at him for a moment. Then: *But we could not do that! The Masters would never allow it. You are like us, not like the others.*

Heldrigsson repeated her answer to Brigham that evening as they were preparing to turn in. "I don't like it," Brigham said. "You know what worries me. Suppose they decide that we can't be taught—whatever they're trying to teach us? What then? Do we get put to sleep too?"

Lars shivered. "I hadn't thought of that."

Brigham sat up on the edge of his bed. "I've thought of it plenty. I've also been thinking that there's more than one way to get through a brick wall. If you can't climb it, or dig under it, you can try breaking a hole in it."

He got up, and walked to the window. "I tell you, we've got to do something besides sit here! I don't care what—take a knife to one of them, if necessary. Force a showdown."

"You'd never get away with it," said Lars. "They'd spot you in a minute."

"Yes, that's just it! Everything we feel strongly about they know in advance. But I've noticed that nobody pays much attention to us when we simply move around. Nobody has done any serious probing for days except during the 'lessons.' "

Lars nodded slowly. "That's true. So what?"

"So suppose we move fast and quietly and try to get out of here."

"But where would we go? Over the hills? They'd have us back the minute they missed us."

"Not if we had a Koenig drive pushing us, they wouldn't."

Lars stared. "You mean steal a ship?"

"Better than that." A flush of excitement rose in Brigham's cheeks. "Look. We know where the men are sleeping. Suppose we went down there and woke them up. Not all of them—just enough to man a ship. If we could somehow keep our minds enough of a blank to keep them from picking us up beforehand, we might be able to make a break for the *Ganymede* and get her aloft before they could stop us."

Brigham regarded Lars grimly. "We wouldn't have to be very far out to throw in the drive. And once home, we could come back here with an armada if necessary."

"Suppose we can't wake them," said Lars bluntly. "They must be drugged."

"The City-people wake them enough to feed them, so they can't be too far under. And we know the City-people don't know enough to have put the ships out of commission."

Both Heldrigsson and Brigham were sitting on the edges of their beds now, wide awake, as the plan developed. They talked for an hour, checking every possible angle. At last Lars shook his head.

"It's risky," he said. "If they nail us, they'll put us to sleep so fast we won't know what hit us."

"But they sleep, don't they? There won't be many awake at this hour, and why should they bother us if we keep our minds on some light, harmless thought like going for a walk, or Mother Goose rhymes, or something of the sort. For that matter, if one of them actually does stop us, we can tell him that the Masters ordered us to do it! That should slow them up for a while at least —maybe long enough for us to get away with it!"

Something flickered deep in Lars mind then—an idea, a thought so vague that it seemed almost to have no substance at all. He frowned for a moment, trying to catch it, to make it crystallize. But it would not come clear. The Masters. A creature, an entity, that long ago had a profound effect on these strange people. Gone now—and yet not really gone. Still constantly present in their minds, directing their thoughts—

"What's the matter?" Brigham said.

"Nothing. Just a thought." Lars rubbed his forehead. "It just struck me that maybe these—Masters—*are* here in the City, after all. Maybe there's a place where the City-people contact them, and confer with them."

"Look, we could sit here and dream up all sorts of things," Brigham said. "But it's not going to get us out of here. I don't think we've got much longer. I think we're going to be sleeping like the rest of the crew if we don't do something to save ourselves right now."

"Well, I agree with you." Lars stood up and pulled his belt tight around the grey cloak that hung from his shoulders. "They're going to be a surprised bunch of people. Make no mistake about that."

"If we get away with it," said Brigham.

"If we get away with it," Lars conceded, grimly. "Let's go."

Like shadows they moved through the door and down the darkened corridor toward the street.

XV

THE CITY was silent as a tomb. The glowing buildings had dimmed and the continual throb of mental activity that was always present at the back of Heldrigsson's mind had dwindled to a ghostly echo of sound.

They moved along silent passages, carefully trying to marshal their thoughts along innocent lines, holding on by the thinnest of memory threads to such dangerous knowledge as their precise destination and what they intended to do when they got there. As they moved undisturbed down through level upon level of the city toward the vault their hopes began to soar.

They passed an old man in a corridor who looked at them with curiosity, and then moved quickly on. A group of young people were gathered at an intersection of arches, but they were so involved in their own thoughts they hardly noticed them as they went speedily by without seeming to hurry at all.

They paused at the head of the staircase that led down to the vault. "If there's a guard, try to draw his attention without exciting him," Brigham warned in a whisper. "I'll try to jump him before he can give an alarm."

"We'll try to awaken Commander Fox first," Lars whispered back. "And the others?"

"Lambert, for one, and Morehouse," said Brigham. "And Lorry, if we have the chance. Ready now? Let's go."

They moved quickly down the stairs. In the great vault room they saw nobody—except the rows of men sleeping on the pallets. And yet, as he blinked in the dim light, Lars had a fierce pang of misgiving. It was not right, doing it this way. Even if they succeeded, it meant leaving behind an alien people—the first contact with an alien race that Man had ever known. It meant leaving without understanding them, running before the puzzle was solved. And worse—there would be no second chance, for if Earthmen came back to Wolf IV, they would come as enemies.

What would Walter Fox do? Lars looked down the row of beds, saw the Commander's face placid now in sleep, and he seemed to hear his words: *Don't spoil it for us, Lars. Trust them. Offer them friendship. This is not the time for hate or fear or mistrust.* . . .

And now, without the least doubt, Lars knew what Fox would do. He hesitated, staring down at the rows of sleeping men as if he were in a dream himself—a

dream from which only courage could awaken him.

Find the answer—while you still can! There must be an answer.

He turned to find Brigham staring at him in alarm. "Lars! I heard that," Brigham whispered hoarsely.

"You—what?"

"I heard what you were thinking just then." Peter Brigham's face was white. "It was clear as crystal, as clear as if—they—had been thinking it themselves. Don't you see, Lars? That is what the 'lessons' have been for. That is what the City-people have been trying to 'teach' us. Only they didn't mean 'teach' the way we think of teaching, with book tapes and experimental labs. They haven't been teaching us—they've been training us!"

Lars stood stock still. " 'The Masters who fed us and—and trained us," he breathed.

"Of course! Trained them for what? Look around you at this city, man—"

From all around them thought-patterns had been rising like a wave, alarmed, fearful, angry. They suddenly realized that they had almost been shouting at each other, and now Brigham gave a groan of dismay as several human figures appeared at the end of the vault. "Too late!" he cried. "Run for it, Lars!"

But they couldn't run. The first of the City-people to see them cried out in alarm, and they found themselves unable to move. Then swiftly more City-people came down the stairs, their eyes wide, and staring, a jumble of thoughts rushing from their minds.

The strangers—down here!

A forbidden place! Why do they seek our destruction?

They were about to waken the sleeping ones.

And then the woman who had been training Heldrigsson was coming through the group, her eyes angry, all trace of gentleness gone from her face. *We should never have waited so long! It was hopeless from the start, in spite of what the Masters taught us. And now even they would destroy us.*

Lars faced her, his eyes blazing. *You're wrong. We did not come here to destroy you, or harm you in any way. You must believe that.*

You came to waken these who sleep here.

Yes, we did—but only when the Masters permit it.

The woman paused, as though he had caught her off guard. *But how could you know what the Masters permit? The Masters said that only in the fullness of time—*

Yes—and the time is now! Lars felt his pulse pounding in his throat and he forced the thought into the woman's mind.

Now? So soon? It could not be so soon.

But if the time is ripe the Masters will allow the sleepers to wake without danger to you. Surely you know that!

Yes, yes, of course.

Lars' eyes were bright. *And there is a place of the Masters here?*

Yes.

Then we demand that you take us there without delay.

The effect was amazing. The City-people stared at one another, and then they crowded around Brigham and Heldrigsson in a rush of excitement. The fear was gone now. They were eager, joyful, suddenly hopeful. And from the woman, the thought came directly to Lars.

If you demand it now, it must be done. You are very brave, you two. The Masters are no longer here, as you must know. But we will take you to the place where the Masters once were. We will take you there now.

And as Heldrigsson and Brigham were swept up by the crowd, the thought rose like a chant of sheer joy and wonderful anticipation—*The Place of the Masters—The Place of the Masters—At last!*

IT WAS an alien place.

The eerie, intangible alienness of it engulfed them like a smothering fog as they walked across the platform toward the oval black door before them.

Lars glanced at Brigham's pale face and rumpled black hair, and clenched his own fists to keep his hands from trembling. The great oval doorway yawned open before them, and inside they could see only blackness.

They looked at each other, hesitating. Then Brigham said, "Good luck, Lars—if we get separated or end up in trouble." Very quickly he stepped through the doorway with Heldrigsson at his heels.

They stood in dead silence as the doorway grew hazy and opaque behind them. They were in a corridor which curved gently off to the right; the walls glowed with a flickering luminescence, and the floor felt strangely soft beneath their feet.

It was an alien place. It vibrated through their bones and enveloped them like a vapor. The door had completely solidified behind them now, and there was no way back. They could only go forward.

Into Limbo, Lars thought, and shivered. *Into the place of lost souls, where only darkness exists.*

He saw Brigham's dark eyes, and knew that he had read the thought.

"What now?" said Brigham. His voice was muffled. "Brother, I don't know about you, but I don't like this."

"We'd better follow the corridor." Lars started ahead, with Brigham close behind.

The corridor curved gently downward, and continued to curve. They walked for what seemed like eternity before Lars stopped, a puzzled frown on his forehead. "I think we're going in circles."

"I know. But they're getting smaller. A spiral. It must end somewhere."

They walked on as the curve grew tighter and tighter. The walls glowed dimly, showing only shadowy outlines of walls, ceiling, floor. Then, quite suddenly, the corridor came to an end.

It was a blind end, like a cul-de-sac. At first the end wall looked just like the ceiling and floor, but as they peered at it, they saw the faint outline of an oval door. A razor-fine line marked its edges. Lars reached out to touch the cool glowing surface. He pushed.

Nothing happened.

"There may be a latch," said Brigham.

"Where?"

Brigham peered at the door, going around the edge carefully. He put his shoulder to it and pushed. Still nothing happened. "Dead end," he said. "We can't get through."

"I think maybe we can," said Lars. He stared at the door, with its tiny flecks of light flickering invitingly. "The lessons. The thing the City-people have been trying to train us to do. Maybe that is the key we need. Maybe we aren't supposed to go through this door until that training is complete."

He stared steadily at the glowing slab, and suddenly imagined that once again he was staring into the pale, flickering blue of the viewing-screen in the City. His eyes widened, and he clenched his fists until his knuckles were white. He had resisted then, drawn himself up, fought that eerie feeling. But now he tried with all his strength to recapture it. He felt the familiar soaring sensation, the odd unsettling feeling that he was outside his body, watching it from a great distance . . .

And a great spiral of light began to form in the center of the door, materializing slowly, growing larger and larger, drawing him down into it, until he felt himself melt into its very substance. A wave of panic swept over him, but he fought it down, desperately, and felt the gauzy softness of the door all around him.

He was through the door.

He had not moved a muscle, but he was through. He took a quavering breath and opened his eyes just as Brigham appeared by his side—out of nowhere.

The last barrier was behind them.

They were in the Place of the Masters.

XVI

THE CHAMBER was small and spherical and almost completely bare.

In the center were two reclining chairs. On all sides the walls of the room curved around in pale silvery brightness—smooth, flawless, unbroken. The air was cool and clean; Lars Heldrigsson could feel it flow gently past his cheek, and suddenly he remembered a night on Earth when he had stood in the darkness on a country hilltop, with no visible light below, no sky-glow, nothing near him but the Earth under his feet and the velvet blackness of the sky, with its pinpoint stars, and a cool breeze passing through the night.

Lars knew that the seats were for them. Nothing else was visible in that tiny chamber—but he could feel a presence there just beyond the reach of his senses. It was an alien presence, a thing not of Earth, not of human kind, never known to Earth. The presence was there—ageless, vibrating with power, staggering in its potential, and yet warm and friendly and eager. Lars could feel the wave of welcome that came from it, the sense of approval, of deep abiding satisfaction.

He looked at Brigham, saw his companion looking about the chamber in wonder. *Did he feel it too—this alien presence?* Their eyes met, and Lars's unspoken question was answered.

Yes. I feel it, too.

They moved toward the seats as if in a dream, and Lars sank down, feeling the gentle pressure of the alien presence directing him, urging him—

Not ordering him. There was no menace here, no compulsion. It was an invitation, an appeal, not a demand.

He felt the soft substance of the seat sweep him in, gently, as the silvery curving walls enveloped him in a whirl of corruscating light.

You have come a voice echoed through his mind, again and again. *After so very long, you have come at last.*

OUT OF THE whirling, awesome depths of space, a Star Ship.

Long, sleek, powerful. A berthing for her, deep in the gentle green mountain slopes. Behind her, a decade of building and planning, a year of selecting her crew, training, equipping, loading, storing, teaching. A fool's venture, the crowds of people whispered as they watched the Star Ship grow. A crowded land, a planet starving itself until soon it would be a dying planet—but still they whispered: a fool's venture . . .

A hundred and fifty years in hopes of reaching a star! Fools!

Those men and women moving slowly up toward the airlock. They will never know if the ship reaches its destination or not. Only their children's children will know.

But these brave ones will know only oblivion. The blackness of space, going on and on and on with no end for them but the sure knowledge that sometime before the end they will die, with their children left to man the ship, and to mourn them.

Fools, yes. But brave fools. Fools with courage, fools with determination, with the vision to see beyond the next day, or month, or year.

The kind of fools that made Mankind great.

Proud fools.

Below them, below the ship, a billow of yellow fire, a roar that echoes up from the depths of Earth itself, rising from a roar to a bellow of defiance. Slowly, like a slender needle pointing to the stars, it rises—rises—

Dwindles from view, a comet, a spark, a flickering red star-dot —then nothing.

A sigh. Men and women turning away, silent, wondering, too filled with wonder for words.

Star Ship *Argonaut*.

Ad astra. Hail and farewell.

THERE WAS silence in the tiny chamber. Lars moved his legs, feeling the alien presence very near him now, guiding him, bearing him back, back, through years of time and eons of space, back to see—

To see what?

A Star Ship, silent and dark.

Most of the crew sleeping. But not everyone. In the control room four men, waiting. One of them, an old, old man, sitting at the charts, poring over the star maps, wearily, hardly able to keep his eyes open, for the hours and days he had worked here checking and rechecking. But the others wait, silent, grim, afraid to break the silence with a sound.

A young man stood up slowly. "Then there is no chance of reaching our destination?"

"None whatever. Not Alpha Centauri. Something beyond—perceptible, but not clear enough to tell."

"We could turn back."

"The fuel supply will never allow it. Not if we ever hope to land the ship—anywhere."

The young man rolled up his charts, looked at the other faces about him. "We will have to alter the teaching program, of course. The others must be told. It will be hard, but with the new ones coming, we must do it."

He left the room. One by one the others filed out, leaving the old man alone.

He sat there staring out at the incredible blackness. He had tasted failure before, but none

quite so bitter as this. Was this to be ultimate failure? He could not know. He had tried, and now—

He slumped forward. He felt only a momentary pang, and then blackness opened for him, soft, inviting, comforting. He knew peace then. Infinite peace.

They would mourn him—their leader, and now the first to go. But a new job would cut the edge of their grief for the old man they had loved so much, the leader they had trusted.

"A boy," the ship's doctor said, his voice vibrant with excitement. "A fine baby boy."

The first to come, also.

Later, much later. Decades later—new faces, new talk, and yet beyond the thin protecting shell of metal, the same blackness. Only the star-shapes were different. Still the ship moved onward, onward—

"It only has a number on these charts, this star ahead," the woman said. "That isn't right. It should have a name. What is a destination without a name?"

"She's right." The man was tall and slender, with rough, powerful features strangely similar to another older face that was almost forgotten now. "But not a man's name, not a family name. We want no dynasties, no precedents."

"But we have a history to remember," the woman said gently. "It was passed down to us, and we will pass it to those in the Cradles. They will be the ones."

"But are the Cradles safe?"

"Utterly safe. Even if the ship were to be totally demolished, the Cradles would survive, and the Children. Shandor has seen to that. The Cradles are self-sustaining, adaptable to a growing infant, complete. Until the planet can care for them." The woman smiled. "There was a story on one of the tapes, a very old story about a wolf protecting two human infants. What were their names?"

"Romulus and Remus."

"And they founded an empire. Yes, that star and its planets must care for the Children, if not for us."

Once again, the silvery chamber. Heldrigsson knew he had never left it, yet he had been transported into another world. He stretched his legs, sleepily. It had seemed like a dream—but he knew it was not. It was like a vivid book-tape flashing through his mind, a record to be felt and understood instantly, a history.

He saw Peter Brigham in the chair beside him, and he was certain that Peter, too, was witnessing this strange history. But even now questions were forming in Lars' mind. A ship, reaching a planet by a tragic error, failing in its original goal, but reaching star Wolf Four with men and women, children and infants aboard, humans like himself—

this he could understand. But how then the City and the City-people? Why their fear of later ships carrying men from the planet that was their mother-world?

And the Masters—what of the Masters?

Once again he sank back against soft cushions, closing his eyes—

But now there was a subtle difference.

Before, he had been seeing through human eyes, feeling as though through human minds. Now it was different. There were distorted pictures, incredible thoughts flashing through his mind. Suddenly he realized that what he was seeing was through an alien mind, with alien thoughts, with a perception and understanding no human mind had ever known.

He watched, through alien eyes, as the Star Ship approached.

It was a battered hulk now, its shine long gone, its surface scarred and pitted. Many of the crew were dead; there were many now who had forgotten everything but survival—they must stay alive. There were many who had forgotten that the Star Ship once had a purpose. They had never known Earth, these crewmen. The ship was their home, their life. The Cradles were their destiny, and these alone they kept intact, faithfully, religiously.

It approached the star Wolf—so near, and yet so far. The fourth planet was right, but fuel was pitifully low, training was poor.

Alien eyes watched aghast as the ship moved down, down, down—too fast, too hard, out of control. Alien minds felt the agony and anguish of the creatures inside the ship, and then the ship struck the ridge, driving down among the rocky crags, turning over in horrible slow-motion, with spurts of flame bursting forth—flickering, dying.

Snow falling on twisted metal, dying men. Alien eyes and minds waiting, watching for something to emerge from the wreckage.

Nothing came forth.

Dead then?

All dead. Nothing could have survived.

But who were they? From whence did they come? Why here?

Who knows? There may be records. We will see.

There were records—tapes, films, voices, the library of the ship, the records of those who taught and those who learned. Alien minds pored over them, learning, studying, seeking to see Earthmen as Earthmen had been on Earth.

Deadly disappointment at first. Searing hopelessness.

No trace of the Strength?

No trace. They were a barren race, to judge from their records. Vocal communication. Physical science and mechanical civiliza-

tion. No evidence of the Strength anywhere.

But for a race to reach space without it—incredible!

You see it here.

Yes. Bitter disappointment. *Yes, we see it.*

And then, somewhere deep in the ship, a spark. Faint—so faint it was barely perceptible, but a spark! *Barren, did you say! Did you feel that?*

Yes, yes! Where?

Excitement, eagerness beyond all caution, as the aliens tore their way through bulkhead and deck, searching, the spark growing stronger and stronger in their minds.

From the Cradles. Infants, nestled in strong steel arms, protected. Sparks of life, but more, far more than that—

Faint, flickering sparks of that precious universal Strength, the Strength that bound intelligent creatures throughout the universe into a union of inestimable power, and raised them above the beasts — The ability to communicate, think, create by thought alone—without spoken or written language symbols.

That magnificent strength of Mind that Earthmen had known as extra-sensory power, and only half suspected; the power that multitudes had scoffed at and claimed did not even exist—

Days, months, years of teaching, nursing the feeble, sensitive spark of the Strength to life and health. It was here in these Earth-infants. It grew stronger, responding to training, to guidance and direction—

It could never have grown strong by itself. Earthmen had the potential for the Strength, had it in rudimentary form—nothing more. They had only a bare perception of its presence. They did not understand it, and hence they feared it. Earthmen were lonely creatures without the Strength. Each man was an island to himself, full of secret thoughts and fears and suspicions. To share these things completely with another was unthinkable, to Earthmen. Fear and hatred were too strong in their minds.

The Strength was driven down, buried, thrust away as something to be feared, to be ignored. It was a cool white flame in infant babies, but it went unrecognized, unbelieved. Infant minds, reaching out their Strength, met wave upon wave of hate and fear and suspicion from the minds of their fellow creatures. Instead of comfort the Strength brought pain, frightful pain. And so it was buried, cast out in fear. It took years to bury it completely—but finally it flickered and almost went out. Lost.

A heritage of mental power unimaginable, but cast aside unknowingly because men had never truly believed that it was there.

But these infants from the Star Ship had a chance. They had been found by creatures who knew the Strength for what it was—something precious, wonderful. These infants grew and developed as no humans had ever grown before in space or time.

There were no echoes of hate and fear in their pliable infant minds, no memories, no other minds to hurt them. There were no crippling fears—nothing at all to quench that strong, cool flame. Their Strength, the extra-sensory power of their heritage, grew strong as they grew. They grew into a culture and science alien to Men, based on complete mutual understanding.

It was a long struggle, but alien minds watched and worked joyfully as they saw the seeds take root. They rejoiced as these two-legged, pale-skinned, great-minded creatures from the planet called Earth grew and emerged into their full heritage for the first time since time began.

The Masters were pleased. They had no selfish motives, for the Masters were strong in the Strength, and selfish motives could not exist. They saw Good here, and they nursed it and supported it as Good must be nursed and supported. This was not their belief, not even their way of life. It was *them,* the sum and substance of their being, to do this.

And the City and the City-people emerged.

But there was still danger. The City-people were weak, like ducklings just out of the shell. If Earthmen were to come, the Strength could be destroyed, for Earthmen would not understand it. They would bring in the hates and fears and suspicions that would tear the City-people's minds into lifeless shreds. Adult human minds set in lifelong patterns could never be trained nor understand. They would fear, and hate, and destroy.

No, there could be no contact with Earth. Not now. The Masters would leave, their work done, but a place would be built for the day when contact could safely be made. Inside it the Masters placed the history of the City-people, sealed in safety. If Earthmen came, they would be placed in endless sleep, until the time when contact could be made.

And only youth could make the contact.

Sometime an Earthman would come to Wolf Four—an Earthman who was old enough to understand Earthmen and the minds of Earthmen, but who was still young enough for his Strength to be trained.

Only then could the gulf between the City-people and the men of Earth once more be bridged . . .

The dream faded, and Held-

rigsson and Brigham sat up, shaking their heads, looking at each other in wonder. There were no words between them, for words were no longer needed. Their minds were open now, and free.

Peter?

Yes. Yes, I'm here. I'm all right. And you?

Of course. They sat in silence for long moments as their minds cleared of what they had just seen.

Did you understand it, Lars? We are the ones. We of all the crew were still young enough to be trained.

Yes. And old enough to cross the gulf. To make Earthmen understand what the Strength is and how to use it. Is that right? Is that what we have to do?

There was no hesitation in Peter Brigham's reply. *Yes. That's what we have to do.*

XVII

COMMANDER Walter Fox waited, stamping the floor impatiently as he stared through the window at the city below. The City-people had taken good care of their charges; the Commander's cheeks and arms had filled out somewhat, and the tired lines around his eyes were softer now. He felt the difference, and knew, somehow, that what had seemed like a moment's deep, dreamless sleep had been far longer than a moment.

Already the other men were being awakened—the remainder of his crew, and the ones from the *Planetfall* who had slept so long. Commander Fox did not know what had happened—only that the City-people had been kind. There had been no sign of hostility. Indeed, they had seemed overjoyed as they crowded around to see the sleepers walking up from the vault, as though a great day had somehow arrived in their lives.

Presently a tall man from the City came to Commander Fox and led him across the archway, into the silvery ship lying on the ramp. His own ship—the *Ganymede.* He found Heldrigsson and Brigham waiting in the control room, and clasped their hands tightly.

"You made contact, then."

"Yes, contact was made," said Heldrigsson. "But these people are not the aliens. They're Earthmen like us—but with a very great difference. It justifies everything you've struggled for."

Carefully, with all the details, Heldrigsson and Brigham told him of the Place of the Masters and what they had found there. They told him of their period of training with the City-people. They told him of the Strength and what it meant to mankind that these children of the *Argonaut* had developed it.

The Commander listened silently as the story unfolded. At

last he said: "Then this—Strength—is extra-sensory power."

"Magnified a thousand times from what we know it," said Lars. "It is a staggering power—so great it puts the Koenig drive in the kindergarten class. But it isn't the things that it can do that count so much. It means men can understand each other completely. It means they can move with complete freedom, accomplish things they have never dreamed of. Remember that these City-people have been limited by isolation. Wait until they have been taught of the Universe around them—of Earth, and the stars!"

"And Earthmen can be like that?"

"Every Earthman has some vestige of the Strength. The young ones can still be trained. That's our job. To show Earthmen what they have had in their grasp all these centuries and never seen."

Fox nodded slowly, and turned back to the window. "And the aliens?"

"The Masters were aliens."

"You never actually confronted them, then."

Lars shrugged. "Yes and no. They left Wolf Four when their work here was done. This was not their native home. But they left something else behind."

Heldrigsson unfolded the chart, a glimmering metallic thing that glowed with star-dots. "This will tell us where they came from—and where they returned to. Sometime we will confront them, if we want to. But we know already the most important thing—that they are *good*. We need never fear aliens again. They have shown us the potential we have if we want to learn to use it."

Fox nodded again, trying to absorb the things they were saying. "But the others, the deserters?"

"Does it matter about the deserters?" Heldrigsson said. "The *Ganymede* has completed her mission. Does anything else matter?"

Commander Fox was hesitant. "A clean slate, then?"

"Why not? Salter can't hurt anybody now."

"All right. A clean slate."

THE SHIP ROSE slowly, leaving the grey ragged surface of the planet far behind. No fire from its jets. No roar from its motors. A greater power lifted it like a feather, until distance allowed the Koenig drive to be started. Behind the *Ganymede* the *Planetfall* rose also.

They had reached Limbo, and survived.

And now, returning, they carried a new heritage for Earthmen. There would be many ships, and many men, before they learned to use the Strength, but they would learn it.

They knew now that a universe was waiting for them.

THE TEMPTER

by ROBERT BLOCH

DOCTOR JENSEN was just lighting his cigar when the stranger walked into his office and sat down directly opposite him.

This annoyed him very much, because the girl in the outer office had strict orders not to admit anyone without an appointment. People didn't just walk in on him—it took several weeks and a series of interviews before a prospective patient actually got to see the Doctor. After all, he wasn't running a mitt-camp. He was a prominent psychoanalyst who owned two apartment buildings outright, and had a mortgage on a third. Even his receptionist knew better than to intrude on him without a signal, and the Doctor seldom buzzed her

Dr. Jensen had treated a good many mentally ill patients. But plain Mr. John Smith had the most complicated mind and body on Earth. Or anywhere in the Universe—for that matter!

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except after office-hours. Lately, he hadn't buzzed her at all.

The Doctor had been anticipating the solitary enjoyment of his cigar. It was a pure Havana filler costing one dollar, much better than the cigars Sigmund Freud could have afforded. Doctor Jensen realized that cigar-smoking helped increase his resemblance to Freud, as did the goatee he so carefully cultivated. A clever touch, but then Doctor Jensen was a clever man. Aside from that, he really enjoyed his cigars, despite what Freud had to say about oral eroticism.

So he was genuinely irked when the stranger appeared.

"Yes?" he said.

"Yes what?" asked the stranger.

Paranoid, the Doctor told himself. But he smiled, ignoring the question. "You wished to see me?" he asked.

"It's necessary," said the stranger.

"What seems to be your difficulty?"

"No difficulty," the stranger assured him promptly. "It's the others who are difficult."

Delusions of persecution, the Doctor noted. He blew a perfect smoke-ring and asked. "What others?"

"The ones who don't believe me. The ones who won't acknowledge my identity. They must know who I am, at least subconsciously. In fact—"

"Who are you?" the Doctor demanded.

"The Devil," said the stranger.

Doctor Jensen stared more intently at the blond, asthenic-looking man who stood quietly facing him with his hands in his pockets. There was nothing at all diabolical about his appearance, and that made his psychosis twice as interesting.

During the course of his professional career, Doctor Jensen had met one Julius Caesar, one Napoleon, two Joans of Arc and innumerable Saviors. But he'd never had a Devil seek him out before.

"Might I have your name?" he asked.

"Satan. Satan the Tempter."

The Doctor blew another smoke-ring. "Your—uh—human name, please."

"John Smith."

"Now, really—" For a moment Doctor Jensen almost lost his professional aplomb. But a hand came out of the stranger's pocket, bearing a social security card and a driver's license. Both were made out to John Smith, and both listed an address on the West Side.

"*That* makes trouble, too," the stranger complained. "You know, sometimes it's easier to get people believing I'm the Devil than it is to tell them I'm John Smith."

"But you really *are* John Smith," said the Doctor. "You know that, don't you?"

"Suppose I put it this way. I was

John Smith until I became possessed. Now I'm Satan the Tempter."

An automatic system of checks-and-balances began to function in Doctor Jensen's cortex. The stranger's suit was shabby, but he had an unusually interesting delusion. There probably wouldn't be much of a fee, but the case had its unique aspects. And finally, the Doctor told himself: *think what a paper I could write on it! It's just what I need for the lectures—a natural for publicity.*

That decided the matter. Doctor Jensen smiled and waved his cigar. "Sit down," he invited. "We'll go into your problem more fully. You'll find me a most sympathetic listener."

When John Smith finally departed, armed with a mild sedative ("Can't you give me something that will make me sleep without dreaming, Doctor? Every night I go straight to Hell!") he had an appointment set up for the following afternoon.

And Doctor Jensen had a miscellany of notes to pore over—more accurately, to puff over, with the aid of a fresh cigar. He sat there now and reviewed his somewhat unorthodox shorthand style.

"B. 1919, Pawtucket R. I., f. butcher, m. clerk, 1 sib., sister, dec. age 10, sc. fvr. No maj. phys. ill., disab. Ed. grmmr., hi sch., then thtre. usher. 4F draft (flt. ft., rupt.) unmarrd., appar. htrosxl. Last 10 yrs. prnter. (Check: "printer's devil").

Nothing there. But some of the responses to the word-association test had been interesting—so interesting, in fact, that he'd circled them in red pencil.

"BLACK—*pit.*"

"RED—*burn.*"

"PUNISH—*my duty.*"

"MAN—*enemy.*"

The patient had a psychotic-type fixation, beyond any possible doubt. Doctor Jensen read the rest of his notes and reviewed what John Smith had told him.

The dreams had begun about a year before. The patient had been tormented night after night by sleep-induced visions of mingled flame and darkness, conveying a sense of confinement that was not claustrophobia but just a feeling of being "sealed off, way under the earth."

At first John Smith had been mortally terrified, screaming himself awake. And then, gradually, the fear vanished, and the darkness and the flames became familiar, recognizable. John Smith came to realize that he *belonged* in the dreams. Finally had come the true realization of his identity.

"Don't you see, Doctor? That's the only way I, or any of the others, can reach upper earth. By contacting the sleeping, defenseless minds of men and gradually taking over their bodies."

"What *others?*" Doctor Jensen had asked.

"The demons. Fiends are confined, of course. They have their eternal, infernal duties below. But the demons roam abroad, seeking living souls. Surely you've heard of demoniac possession."

"You must have done considerable reading in the field," Doctor Jensen observed.

But John Smith shook his head. "No reading," he replied. "What I know I've learned from first-hand experience. And that kind of knowledge is always the best."

Doctor Jensen nodded, but he didn't believe it. The pattern seemed obvious. John Smith, job printer in a large shop, unmarried, without close friends or family ties—such a man might easily spend many hours of his time in the public library, reading up on obscure religious and metaphysical concepts. A man who might get to brooding about his vanished youth (and, perhaps, his potency: better check that angle, too) and his personal obscurity. Every psychiatrist worth his forty-minute hour knew that the latent aberrations of the subconscious could be drawn from dreams and transformed into power-symbols. In Smith's case the dreaded nightmares had become the springboard for delusions of grandeur and John Smith had become the Devil.

Simple. Probably much *too* simple. But Doctor Jensen would probe more deeply.

"Precisely what do you do?" he asked, "when you feel you're the Devil?"

"I tempt people," John Smith told him. "That's my mission. To tempt others to Evil, so that I may snare their souls for my own. Not the truly virtuous, of course—they're a waste of time. I seek out those who have already succumbed to sin. The most likely prospects, those who need only a final nudge."

Doctor Jensen talked on as he scribbled. "Do you enjoy being the Devil?" he asked.

John Smith shrugged. "Yes, I do," he declared. "*I* do, because *I* am Satan. But the other part, the *human* part—sometimes it takes hold and realizes it can't stand the dreams and the knowledge. That's the part that wants your help. Oh, how can I explain it?"

"You don't need to explain it," the Doctor smiled, as he wrote down *schizo* and underlined it in his notebook.

It was then that he'd made the appointment for the following day. John Smith had been pathetically grateful, and insisted that Doctor Jensen take twenty dollars.

Jensen, torn between telling him that his usual fee was thirty dollars or just refusing the money altogether, finally pocketed the amount and dismissed his new patient.

After all, twenty dollars was twenty cigars, was two bottles of good Scotch, was one-fifth of a night with that new girl Miss Charlene had called him about. And a rose was a rose was a rose.

So Doctor Jensen put aside his notes now and went out for the evening, during the course of which he partook of all three of the pleasures which had come to mind when he accepted the money.

And thus hygienically refreshed, he returned to his office the next day and awaited, late in the afternoon, the coming of his new patient. He wanted more word-association tests, he wanted free-fantasy, he wanted an immediate transference. He put John Smith on the couch and started him talking.

One month and fifteen sessions later, John Smith was still talking. And Doctor Jensen had learned nothing. Oh, he had all the data on John Smith's humdrum and utterly Smithsonian existence as a man. But the Devil eluded him.

He couldn't uncover the traumatic incident that had been the scource of the fantasies. And that was what he needed in order to do a successful monograph or, at the very least, a successful lecture. Was —Doctor Jensen permitted himself to wonder—because he actually didn't know how to conduct a really successful analysis? Was it because he'd gotten into the habit of merely going through the motions, striving to *keep* his patients rather than cure them?

The thought irritated him. And one afternoon, following a trying day during which he'd been forced to commit a regular hundred-dollar-a-week analysand to an institution, Doctor Jensen lost control. He began to question his patient directly and to make positive statements.

"You say you're the Devil. The Devil in John Smith's body, which you entered during sleep. Why? Why choose that particular body? What purpose have you on earth? It makes no sense."

The man on the couch smiled. "Sense. What is 'sense'? Perhaps I chose the body because it *is* so nondescript—as average as the name. I'm less conspicuous that way, for my purpose. And my purpose is, as I've told you, to tempt mankind and to snare souls."

Doctor Jensen bit off the end of his cigar—and to blazes with the symbolic content of the act. "All right, if you're convinced of that, why did you come to me and beg to be relieved of your delusion?"

"It's not a delusion. Not to *me* it isn't. It's only a delusion to the John Smith personality who originally sought you out. *He* doesn't matter any more, for *I'm* in complete control now."

"Very well." Doctor Jensen leaned forward, his jaw muscles tightening. "You're the Devil. You're sure of it, and you're satisfied to be the Devil. So why do you keep coming back here to me?"

Still smiling, the man on the couch put his hands in his pockets. "Because I have another purpose, Doctor. I'm here to snare your soul."

"*My* soul?" Doctor Jensen felt the irritation grow. He didn't have to take this sort of thing from a charity case. "What if I told you I don't believe in the soul, or an afterlife, or the Devil?"

"I know," said his patient. "That's what makes it so easy."

"Easy?"

"At first I thought it might be difficult. Although you're obviously ripe for Hell, the problem of temptation seemed formidable. No sense offering you riches because your profession, as you practise it, brings you wealth. As for the pleasures of the senses, you have ample access to them all. But there's pride and hatred and the urge to kill—"

Doctor Jensen stiffened. *Projection,* he told himself. "Let's talk about those things," he said, softly. "Have you ever wanted to kill someone, John Smith? Did you ever want to kill your father because of what he did to your mother, or—"

John Smith laughed. "No, Doctor. I've never had the urge, any more than I had parents. I've never wanted to kill, or torture, or rape, or indulge in any act of violence. Those are *human* failings, not diabolical ones. Those are the traits that condemn humans to Hell, where I extend punishment.

"I have pride, yes—the pride of Lucifer, Prince of Darkness. But that pride is based on the realization that I'm above human vices and greeds. I have my hatred, too—hatred of being eternally condemned to associate with evil humanity. But I've no urge to kill. That's *your* problem."

Doctor Jensen bit the end of his cigar again, and cut his lip. It was extremely painful, and for a moment something rose unbidden to the threshold of consciousness; something strangely similar to the urge to kill. Then he remembered that he himself had once undergone a complete analysis, that he was a pillar of his profession, and that the patient on the couch before him could be numbered among the least important of men.

He forced himself to smile tolerantly upon his patient, saying, "Very well. But you aren't very convincing, you know. If you're the Devil, where are your supernatural powers? You don't walk through walls or vanish in a puff of smoke. To be blunt, you hardly impress me."

John Smith sighed. "I should think you'd understand," he said. "If I walked through the wall right now—and I assure you I can, quite easily—you wouldn't believe the evidence of your own senses. Your so-called professional training would lead you to label the phenomenon as pure hallucination.

"As for vanishing in smoke or similar devices, it's all a matter of keeping abreast of the times. Some hundreds of years ago, when my reality was widely acknowledged, people expected such feats and were not too startled or surprised. But today I'd merely attract unwelcome attention. And my strength lies in remaining anonymous. In a prosaic body I come and go as I please, tempt and snare, tempt and snare."

Doctor Jensen was impatient again. "Whom do you tempt and whom do you snare?" he snapped. "Every day you come and lie here on my couch, you lie and lie—"

"Father of Lies. That's the association, isn't it?" John Smith sat up and nodded. "But I assure you, I speak the truth. I've winnowed and won many souls since my sojourn in this body. Fat bankers and red-necked military men, and rich women like perfumed hogs, and drunken foundry-workers and fraternity brothers and a transvestite in the subway and a boy who smothered his baby sister and a girl who—"

"Baby sister," snapped Doctor Jensen. "Quick now! Did you ever try to smother your baby sister?"

John Smith grinned. "No," he said. "You don't believe me, do you? But I speak the truth. Truth is the weapon I've chosen to snare your soul."

Doctor Jensen took a quick look around his office, to reassure his sense of reality. "That's enough for today," he declared. "But don't be discouraged. I'll cure you yet."

His patient shook his head slowly. "Truth is my weapon," he repeated. "And the truth is that you've never cured anyone in your life."

"Now see here—"

"I do see. I see everything. Your methods are not sound, Doctor Jensen. You've never really corrected a neurotic, psychotic or psychosomatic disorder. You don't care to. Your policy is to make your patients permanently dependent on you, so that they remain patients. At times you've managed to relieve them of superficial tension, together with most of their cash. But you don't care."

"How dare you intimate a thing like that?"

John Smith grinned again. "Pride is one of your sins, and hatred is another. Hatred you express in your extortionate attitude toward the tenants of your apartment buildings. Hatred you scarcely managed to mask when you rail-

roaded Doctor Klauss out of the profession two years ago by falsely testifying under oath that he supplied narcotics to confirmed addicts."

Doctor Jensen rose. "Where'd you find that out?" he gasped. "Nobody knew—"

"*I* know." John Smith walked over to the window, and stared down at the streets of the city like a saturnine gargoyle. "I know everything. I know about the girls you visit at Miss Charlene's, I know about your secret files, I know about the ten thousand in cash you got from old Ligget's nephew for having him committed to the asylum. I know about every dirty action, every filthy thought in your miserable life. Your life, motivated by pride and hatred and the urge to kill."

Doctor Jensen gripped Smith's shoulder, his voice rising above the traffic murmur from the street far below. "Now I'm beginning to understand," he muttered. "It was all a gag, wasn't it? You came here to get next to my girl, get at my files. You're a spy, aren't you? Who sent you? Was it Klauss or some of those old women who've been after my hide?"

John Smith turned. "Take your hand off my shoulder," he said. "I dislike being touched."

Doctor Jensen's face contorted violently. "You dislike being touched, eh? You, with your nonsense about the Devil, coming here and trying to make a fool out of me, trying to wreck my career!" His hand moved from John Smith's shoulder, rose to his neck. "I could kill you—"

And before he knew it, Doctor Jensen was killing him. Both hands up now, tight around the throat, and John Smith was the asthenic type, no match for a powerfully built man bent on murder. He was making harsh gargling noises but he kept right on smiling, and Doctor Jensen knew he would have to wipe that smile off his face, forever.

Then they were stumbling forward, and the window was open, and Doctor Jensen felt an emotion so pure it was almost an ecstasy. It came from the realization that he *was* killing, and it was a wonderful feeling of release, with everything turning red.

Only he must have stumbled against the window itself, because there was a bump and a wrench and a crash. He tried to release his grip but it was too late.

Doctor Jensen and John Smith toppled out of the window together and crashed nine stories to the pavement below.

Even in death's coming, Doctor Jensen retained his basic convictions. He admitted John Smith had been right in a way. He'd hit on Doctor Jensen's weak points, for there *was* pride, there *was* hatred, there *was* an urge to kill. Come

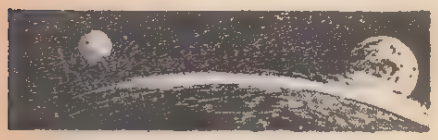
to think of it, John Smith had even tempted him into killing.

But that was as far as Doctor Jensen would go—as far as his swirling thoughts *could* go before he hit the pavement. He still didn't believe in God, or the Devil, or an afterlife.

That's why it was so particularly shocking, after a moment of black concussion, to find himself up and walking down the long dark corridor. That's why it was so shocking to reach the end of the corridor and gaze through the open door at the radiant reaches of fiery fury beyond.

That's why it was so shocking when Doctor Jensen saw the figure standing inside the doorway, smiling a greeting.

"Hello," said John Smith.



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DOOM OVER KAREETA

By JOHN CHRISTOPHER

Famine and disaster threatened the Kranaki's underwater city. Only the pygmies could help, and they lived in a far-off, quite mad world.

THERE WAS a swell moving in from the Deep. Even here in the Council Place, where it was sheltered, they could feel it and see the phosphorescence flickering under the quickening pulse of the waters. Out in the Deep the waters would be surging heavily. There would be damage on the outlying hydrofarms, and another bad harvest.

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Dilwan, swimming in powerfully to the centre of the throng, could sense the mood of despair that hung over everyone. He looked down towards the mass of dark figures huddled on the seabed, and remembered what his father had told him of the last days of Serbena.

Dilwan himself had been born during those days, when the harvests had failed for the last time and the giant sharks had breached the defences and torn a path of destruction through the doomed city. In a vague way, he could even remember fragmentary details of the terror-fraught journey across the Deep to Kareeta. But most of what he remembered came from the stories his father had told him, many seasons before. Of the inky, nonphosphorescent blackness of the Deep. Of the huge forest of squids into which they had blundered, and where his mother had died. Of the flashing, bloody stories of sharks, as they swept down on the tattered fugitives from Serbena. And at last, of the sight of the walls of Kareeta where they had found safety.

All that was ninety seasons ago. More than seventy seasons had passed since his father had been killed by the sharks while working on an outlying hydro-farm. In that time Kareeta, season by season, had slipped nearer to the doom that had overwhelmed her sister-city.

Each season the scavenger-fish preyed more openly on the hydro-fields, swooping down in the wake of the shark bands and laying waste acres of cultivated land. The two races had evolved a strange, menacing symbiosis; as though they were deliberately combining to exterminate the Kranaki and crush intelligence in the world of water. And they were only part of the doom hanging, more and more ominously, over Kareeta. Each season the squids advanced more openly up the sides of the Deep. They had overwhelmed the whaling station at Purka. And the whales themselves were less and less tractable. Fewer returned to their pens each season. Those that did frequently turned on their Kranaki masters.

Finally, in the last thirty seasons, eruptions and land-quakes had occurred with greater and greater frequency, bringing with them swells and storms, splitting and laying waste the hydro-farms and shaking Kareeta itself. It seemed to the Kranaki that the end could not be long delayed. And with the end of Kareeta would come the end of their race. There was no other city to which the survivors could retreat. Since the fall of Serbena, Kareeta had been the only stronghold of the Kranaki.

Dilwan stopped swimming,

and allowed the current to carry him gently into the place reserved for him on the dais. They had been waiting for him. He relaxed and listened. The President, Balakon, began speaking, slapping the water with his huge flippers into impulses that rippled out to the antennae of the waiting Kranaki.

He said: "The allotment of *pilner* will be halved from the beginning of next season. All the *pilner* crops in the hydro-fields to the northwest have been destroyed by the last eruption."

A sigh rippled round and in towards the dais, emanating from hundreds of flippers. Dilwan felt the shock; a realization of the desperate situation. Without *pilner* the Kranaki could not live. On half their present allotment they would be perilously near to starvation.

Balakon went on: "In the last season over a hundred Kranaki have been killed; mostly by sharks, a few by squids, three by rebellious whales. Our numbers are now less than seven hundred. But even for seven hundred our harvests are too meagre. The fewer there are, the fewer we can spare for guards, and the more easily can the sharks break through to ravish the farms and even the outskirts of the city itself. We must break this stranglehold if Kareeta is not to die."

He paused, waiting for the impulses of despair to die out of the water.

"I can remember," Balakon continued, "when the Kranaki held five great cities and numbered more than a hundred thousand. That was only eight hundred seasons ago. In the times of our grandfathers the Kranaki cities spread out in hundreds to the further seas; to the warm seas of the south and to the cold seas that stretched beyond to the ice. And round the cities, league after league, lay the hydro-farms, growing a multitude of crops that now are only a memory."

He stopped for a while, remembering. "When I was very young," he said, "I tasted *charang*. It had a lightness and warmth and beauty in it, so that your body felt as insubstantial as a floater when you had eaten it. It grew only in the cold beyond the warm, in the gardens of the city of Charbera, which died seven hundred seasons ago. There will be no more *charang*."

A current swept through the Council Place, stirring the tendrils of the Kranaki with thoughts of the storms swirling up from the Deep around them.

Balakon said: "In the days of our grandfathers the Kranaki ruled from cold to warm and on to cold again; from the bottom of the Deeps to the thin waters above. The whales came and went at our bidding; the sharks cowered away from us in the thin waters,

and our ancestors hunted them for sport. We were supreme until—the Shock.

"You have all heard of it; of the days when the sea-bed crumbled beneath our cities and substances bubbled up, turning the water into thin, blindingly hot mist. Only in the far south and here in the north did a few cities survive; cities that have fallen one by one before the attack of the sharks and the squids, and the tremblings of the sea-bed. Now there is only Kareeta, and it seems impossible that Kareeta can survive another ten seasons."

The vibrations of despair rocked more violently through the waters of the Council Place. Dilwan, listening, realized that the calm pronouncements of Balakon were grimly reinforcing the sense of doom that hung over the Kranaki. Each must have known the end was near, and hoped to be mistaken. Balakon spoke with a dreadful, inescapable authority. And yet Balakon himself had planned the one possible way of salvation. Now he went on, firmly over-riding the despair about him.

"It seems impossible," Balakon said, "but there is one chance of saving our race. For thousands of seasons, among the things that have dropped into our depths from the thin water there have been some that were not dead fish but strange, artificial creations containing queerly-formed, dead pygmies. It is in our history that these creations have changed throughout the seasons, becoming more complex as though fashioned by a race of growing culture and ingenuity. We thought for a long time that the pygmies who must have made them lived in the thin water, and that these, perhaps, were their funeral vessels, designed to carry their dead into what, to them, would be the mysterious depths below.

"For thousands of seasons our ancestors planned how they might establish contact with the pygmies, and perhaps help them in their struggles against their enemies. Some of their bodies that we found had had limbs torn by our own enemies, the sharks. But by ourselves we could not penetrate up into the thin water. It was not until a few hundred seasons before the Shock that Ralbaned, the great hydro-farmer, developed that new hard, transparent coral of which Kareeta is built, and adapted it to the creation of pressure-suits moulded to our shapes.

"Since then our adventurers have swum up through the thin water and found a world of thin mist lying above it, and learned that the pygmies live on the bed of that mist, using their strange vessels to cross the intervening waters. When the Shock came we were preparing to send large expeditions to meet them. Even since the Shock our adventurers

have dared the thin waters and the blockade of sharks to see this strange world above us. And we have kept a watcher at our last outpost, Berdan.

"A tunnel leads up to Berdan, a tunnel which the sharks have not yet found. Once at Berdan our watchers are safe from them, for Berdan itself is surrounded on all sides by the air-bed on which the pygmies live. For a season at a time the watchers stay, burdened by pressure-suits, trying to make contact with the pygmies. But as the watchers could only plunge into the mist for a fraction of time, they have always failed. The pygmies do not recognize them, except, perhaps, as strange fish.

"Now, in the time of our greatest need, another hydro-farmer has found what may be the solution to our desperate plight. Dilwan, a native of lost Serbena, has found a means of lining the pressure-suits with a new form of sponge. In the new pressure-suit a Kranak can venture into the mist, protected from thinness by the coral, and from waterlessness by the sponge. At last we can meet the pygmies on their own air-bed!

"We will go to them, and they will help us against our mutual enemies, the sharks, and give us their strange, fashioned things to help on the hydro-farms, while we in turn teach them of all the richness that lies on the sea-bed for those that have the strength to take it. Nothing will be able to stand against the combined force of the Kranaki and the pygmies.

"But it will not be easy to penetrate the mist. Even with the new pressure-suits it will be an agonizing adventure, only to be borne for a short time. We must send an emissary, who can first prove our intelligence to the pygmies. Dilwan, who made this venture possible, has asked to be allowed to go, and we have given permission. Dilwan! The future—the very existence—of the Kranaki depends on your mission. May the Ruler of the Deep attend you!"

Dilwan heard the chorusing vibrations. "The Ruler of the Deep attend you!" He felt inside himself the pride of the Kranaki, of the race that had once held the oceans to their furthest reaches. On him the future depended, and he would not fail them.

Two of the Kranaki floated down to him, holding the artificially-shaped coral that was to protect him from the thinness above. He wriggled into it, and when the head-piece had been pulled down the coral insects were set to work on the join, to seal them until his return. Only a small gap was left, so that water could continue to flood in around him. He would not seal this with coral until, at Berdan, he was ready to meet the pygmies.

Now, with powerful strokes, he

swam above the Council of Kranaki. For a moment he watched them, feeling their vibrations of hope and goodwill beating even through the enclosing coral. Then, with a steady, powerful motion, he was swimming away from Kareeta. Six young Kranaki swam with him, spared from the desperately urgent need of the harvest to protect him against sharks until he reached the mouth of the tunnel.

Half a dozen sharks eddied down, but sheered away quickly at the sight of the seven Kranaki. Dilwan felt a surge of vicious hatred against them and their cowardly avoidance of battle except when they outnumbered the Kranaki by four or five to one. The hatred changed into triumph as he thought of his own mission, and how its success would put weapons into the hands of the Kranaki.

We shall hunt them down, he thought with grim satisfaction, we and the pygmies. We shall hunt them until not a shark remains in the oceans. Even the small ones in the thin water we shall destroy. And the cities of the Kranaki shall rise again.

II

ROGER BLAINE groaned in more than spiritual anguish. The road seemed to be turning into a sticky river of molten lead. The front wheel of his bicycle was continually popping the bubbles of tar that swelled up in front of them, while ahead, waves of heat shimmered up like a wall of mist between the loch and the forested hills. He felt as though he had been cycling for years through a section of Dante's Inferno. And Hilda looked as cool and unperturbed as ever.

"Take it easy," he panted. "What are you using for power—atomic energy?"

His wife smiled sweetly at him. "Just ordinary muscle power, darling," she replied. "I told you you were getting too flabby. This sort of holiday is just what you need. Wait till I've had you up and down Ben Nevis a few times! You'll be a different man."

"I won't last that long," he prophesied gloomily. "Another hundred yards of this and I shall melt into a grease ball and evaporate. When I think of the things you told me about the cool Scottish valleys and lochs, I feel that my faith in woman is shaken for ever."

Hilda smiled. "Hold on," she said. "It's less than a mile now to Invermoriston. I should hate to think of you melting away when almost in sniffing distance of a nice long, cool pint of beer. Contemplate the beauties of Ness and forget the heat. You might see the monster! As a qualified zoologist, you could classify it. Think of it—*draco Blainensis!*"

Roger grunted. "Any monster with any sense would keep well under in this weather. Anyway, it's too early in the day, and the weather's too clear. For the creation of the Loch Ness monster you need a nice misty evening full of shadows, a preliminary oiling of good, strong Scotch, and a Celtic imagination. Given those three, you stand a chance of seeing monsters by the million."

"You skeptical scientists!" Hilda protested. "Just because you haven't got their bones neatly docketed in the Natural History Museum in Kensington, sea-monsters can't possibly exist. When it should be obvious that, if they live at the bottom of the ocean, you could never by any chance find their remains."

Roger mopped his sweating brow with a handkerchief. If anything, it was getting a little hotter, incredible as it seemed.

"There are at least two very good reasons for disbelieving the Loch Ness monster story," he said wearily. "In the first place, it is difficult to see how the monster could get along the Caledonian Canal from Inverness to the loch without being spotted, and no one has yet reported its presence in the canal. In the second, if the monster lives, as you claim, at the bottom of the ocean, then the difference in pressure at the surface of the water would kill it immediately."

"Not valid," Hilda declared. "In the first place, the monster might have been in the loch for hundreds of years, or there might be a subterranean entrance somewhere. And in the second, it might be a tough monster, able to withstand different pressures. There could be all sorts of reasons. You're just a dogmatic scientist. I hope the monster comes after you!"

"I'll try the Scotch this evening, and brush up my imagination," he promised.

"We'll see about that," his wife said grimly.

At last the road bent away from the loch, and the welcome sight of the Invermoriston Hotel lay before them. With surprising speed Roger parked his bicycle and disappeared into the lobby. When Hilda followed him, she found him contemplating the remains of a pint of beer.

"Your watch was slow," he said reproachfully. "We almost didn't make it. It's a quarter to two."

"Lemonade would have been just as good for you," Hilda said, ignoring his instinctive shudder. "But I've good news for you. They have some room here. As it will probably be past three o'clock by the time we finish lunch, I thought we might have a rest and set off for Fort Augustus in the morning. I think you've lost enough fat for one day."

Roger rolled his eyes up.

"Saved at the eleventh hour!" he murmured. "This calls for another drink."

Hilda watched the beer vanish. "Come on," she said. "Lunch is ready. If we get it over quickly we can go for a ramble up the Moriston."

She dragged him away, protesting.

It was not until evening, however, that Hilda succeeded in getting him away from the hotel, and then he refused point-blank to walk up the winding Moriston, insisting instead on the shorter walk to the loch. And at Dalcataig Pier he insisted on resting, developing a sudden passion for contemplating the beauties of Ness.

The scene was impressive. Behind them rose the hilly forests of Portclair and Invermoriston, dark, tossing green in the evening breeze. In front lay the purple loch and, further on, the gently rising heights beyond Glen Albyn. The sun which had set behind Portclair was still lingering on the house-tops of Invermoriston.

A boat came into Dalcataig Pier, and men got out, workers from the aluminum works on the other side of the loch. Roger and Hilda heard them talking excitedly as they passed: "Och! Wullie McKay saw it. He said you couldna mistake it. It's the auld monster again. I ken fine we'll have the newspaper bodies doon with us again noo."

"There you are," Hilda said triumphantly. "It's back!"

Roger smiled the superior, irritating smile of one who knows better. "Let's get back to the hotel," he said. "I want to stoke my imagination up."

As they were turning back from Daclataig they met a man running towards them. He called breathlessly:

"Tak heed! The monster's in the Moriston, wallowing like a whale. I'm off to the Pier for a gun."

There was no disputing his sincerity or sobriety. Without a word, Roger and Hilda began to run towards the river Moriston. They reached the bridge to find all the inhabitants of the tiny village assembled up on it.

Then they saw it, wallowing up the small river from the loch. A vast, scaly neck rose from the water, upholding a long, flat head that peered dazedly about, as though the tranquil light of the Scottish twilight were too brilliant for it. Its body stretched behind, an impressive bulk tapering into flippers in parts. Just under the neck were two membranous tendrils, projecting stiffly like spears. It moved awkwardly up the river towards the bridge.

For a moment the villagers stayed, gazing at the invader in stark disbelief. Then they fled,

panic-stricken, back to their houses. Hilda felt like joining them, but Roger was leaning so far forward over the bridge in his anxiety to take in all details of the monster that she felt obliged to hang on to his coat, in case he overbalanced and fell into the river.

The monster seemed to notice the villagers streaming away, and made a move towards the bank as though to follow them. But the pull of the water was too much for it, and it fell back defeated. Rolling in mid-stream, it lifted its head towards the bridge again, and saw the two people still standing there. The long, scaly neck moved towards them. Hilda felt like screaming, but Roger was gazing at the approaching monster as though it were the Holy Grail. Her nose caught the thick, fishy smell of the sea. She stared at the broad, serpentine head and the gleaming eyes.

There was a cry from the south bank, and she saw the Scot they had passed on the road running towards them, waving a rifle.

"Ye're all richt!" he shouted. "Hauld on—I've got a bullet for it."

Roger shouted back frantically: "No, no! Don't shoot for God's sake. *It's wearing a diving suit!*"

The Scot levelled his rifle. "I'm nae fashed if it's wearin' a kilt," he called. "It's not coming up the Moriston!"

The shot rang out above Roger's frantic appeals. The monster reared as a bullet hit it in the neck. There was a brief, high whistling, as though a balloon were being deflated, and the long neck slumped forward into the water.

Roger dashed down to the bank, and into the river, with Hilda following.

"It can't be dead," he muttered. "A single bullet can't stop an elephant, let alone a thing like this. Unless . . . I can't believe it!"

The head had fallen sideways, so that it projected a little from the water. Roger bent over it, his lips tight. After a moment he looked up at Hilda watching from the bank. The villagers had begun to swarm back, realizing that the monster had been overthrown.

Roger said: "It's dead, all right. Diagnosis—multiple internal ruptures. The same as we would have if suddenly transported into a vacuum. That shot merely punctured its protective covering."

Hilda said: "You mean . . . ?"

"That it was an intelligent being!" Roger exclaimed. "I guessed it from the bridge, when that fool was waving his gun about. God, what a waste!" He climbed wearily out of the water.

"Maybe another one will follow it," Hilda said reassuringly. "The natives can be warned. Next time it will be different."

Roger looked back over the

bridge. The villagers were clustered in excited groups, looking down on the monster where it lay with the water washing over it.

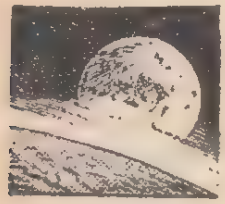
"Maybe," he said. "If there *is* a next time."

III

THE LAST quake had brought down several pillars of the Council Place. A strong current was flowing through Kareeta, brushing the phosphorescent organisms into startling lambency. Balakon looked round at the huddled Kranaki.

"We must still hope," he signalled. "A young, strong Kranak such as Dilwan could last a whole season in a pressure-suit. Perhaps he is having difficulty in convincing the pygmies of the urgency of our plight. We must hope that he will come back. We have tried to duplicate the pressure-suit he made, but the sponge does not breed true. We might stumble on it again tomorrow—or never. And the harvest is worse, even than we had feared it would be. Kareeta can only survive a few more seasons. We must hope Dilwan will come back."

The Kranaki huddled silently about the dais from which their leader spoke. High above circled a school of giant sharks, watching and waiting with timeless malignance.



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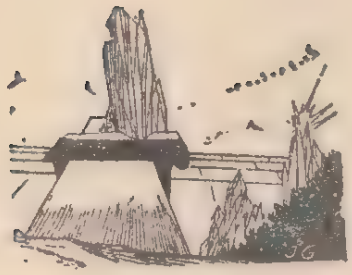

The children's vacation led to an astounding discovery

Bone of Contention

THE MACHINE settled slowly to rest in a large, sandy place by a swift-running river. The children tumbled out first, pushing and mauling each other, making so much noise that Lon had to speak sharply to them.

He waited for their exuberance to subside, then he looked half-helplessly at his wife.

"They'll get over it," Nyra said, smiling.

"I suppose so. And yet—"

Lon paused, staring out over the dry, wind-carved land, staring at all the fantastic colors and grotesque shapes until Nyra asked, "What's troubling you, darling?"

"Nothing," he said. "You take the lunch box and I'll gather up the tools."

They picked a wind-sheltered spot high on the bank, only a few hundred feet from the machine. Here they could look down at the cool, azure-blue water. Here and there it broke into whitecaps. There were no clouds. The sky was a deep, rich blue, and didn't blend off into haze at the horizon. A few pale flowers lined the bank.

"It must have been a pleasant place to live," said Lon.

"Imagine it was—on days like this. But what about the days when the weather was bad. And

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the winter. It must have been terrible in winter."

Lon nodded, his eyes clouding over. He was thinking about their own home in City Twelve again—their own pleasant and roomy apartment where the temperature never varied. The televiews plates could be changed with the flick of a control, and they could live deep in a woodland glade, or by the sea, or even travel from place to place as they relaxed in comfort in easy chairs.

Lon was an archaeologist, grade seven, which meant that the Bureau's Interstellar Research bigwigs left him pretty much to his own devices. Possibly that was the trouble. Possibly he felt he was betraying the confidence which his superiors had reposed in him.

He was preparing a report: *Unified Theory of Dominant Civilizations,* but had found himself at a complete standstill. Not a word, not a scrap of information, not a new conclusion for a month. Nyra had suggested the vacation.

"We'll take Miti and San and go out to Inland for a few days," Nyra had said. "We can sleep in the machine, and living on concentrates for so short a time won't hurt us. The Bureau has all of the areas of radiation marked carefully, so we won't have to worry about that."

He had thought it a wonderful idea. They had spent three days wandering more or less aimlessly over the big sloping plain and the mountain chains of the continent—the vast area called Inland. And Lon was now eager to get back to work. In fact, he could hardly restrain his impatience.

"Where are the kids?" he asked suddenly.

Nyra looked around. "I saw them moving about just up the river a moment ago. Miti waved to me from the bank."

"I don't hear them." Lon smiled a little. "I usually know where they are, because I can hear them squabbling."

"Now, Lon," said Nyra, "they are only youngsters. They'll learn. If anything, it's our fault—we had them just a little too far apart. Miti wasn't quite through needing to be babied when San came along."

He nodded understandingly. "You have a point there. I guess all the children hate to think that somebody new can threaten their security. We have adults psyched when they reach that stage."

Nyra said, "When you find them don't scold them for running off. Try to be casual."

"All right. You're the expert on youngsters—I'll stick to digging."

She laughed. "You're still thinking about your theory, aren't you?"

"I guess I am. Subconsciously, anyway."

Lon had been ready to walk off, but now he turned back and

gestured. "There must be one basic thing that made the species here extinct—a cause, a factor. Don't ask me how I'm so sure—it's a matter of feeling. I know it's here in my brain, but I just can't make it come out right."

He saw that she was looking at him in an amused, almost compassionate way, and broke off abruptly. "All right," he said. "I'll stop."

He got up and headed north along the bank, walking briskly. He heard the youngsters again moments later, their voices raised in shrill bickering.

"It's mine, it's mine, *it's mine!*" shouted San. "I saw it first!"

"But I dug it out! You didn't!" Miti shouted back.

"Just the same, it's mine!"

"No, it isn't. Let go of it, or I'll slap your face. I will, I will."

Lon came to the edge of the bank and looked down. They were having a tug-of-war with a hard, earth-blackened object a foot or so in length.

"Well," said Lon. "And just what do you think you've found?"

"It's something *I* found," said San.

"I dug it out!" Miti protested. "Make him give it back to me."

Lon scrambled down the bank. "All right," he said sternly. "Let me see it."

San pouted and obeyed, casting a resentful glance at his sister.

"*Hm*," said Lon. "Well, well." He examined the object carefully, and with deep interest. "So you both wanted to hold on to it, and fought over it."

"What is it, Daddy?" San asked.

"A bone."

"What's a bone, Daddy?"

Miti said, "I know what a bone is. Some animals have bones."

Lon looked at them absent-mindedly for an instant. Then he spoke aloud, but he was really talking to himself. "Yes," he said. "But this is a *very old* bone. We've found a few others like it—most of the museums have them. In fact, we've even reconstructed an entire skeleton from the fragments."

There was a very serious look in his eyes now. "I'm glad you found this bone, children. *And in just this way*. Because now my theory is complete. Now I know exactly why the species who once lived here became extinct. I should have guessed it before."

It was a very long speech for the children. So long indeed that they lost interest until Miti changed the subject.

"Well, it's *my* bone," he insisted "I dug it out."

"I saw it first, I saw it first!" chanted San.

Lon smiled. "No. It belongs to *both* of you. And to Mother and myself—to everybody. Just as the sun and all the planets do. That was the thing the creature this

bone came from failed to realize. And so he became extinct."

"What kind of a creature was he, Daddy?"

"A fantastic being. I'll show you the museum reconstruction pictures when we get home. He walked on two legs and had a pinkish skin without much hair. And he covered himself with cloth, and built fairly large cities of heavy stone and metal. But he couldn't stop fighting with his own kind. In his own language we think he called himself *'Man'*."

The wind made San blink.

Lon held out one of his tentacles and the children each hooked one of their own tentacles to it and he led them back to where Nyra was getting the lunch out of the picnic basket.

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Our reviewer pauses in his timely survey of books and collectors' items to discuss a great magazine editor's contributions to fantastic literature.

by SAM MOSKOWITZ

THE LIST OF outstanding present-day writers either discovered or developed by the fantasy pulps is a long and illustrious one and it grows ever longer as young fantasy writers graduate from the ranks and swell the roles. I would place at the head of that list the name of a man whom many regard as the greatest living American dramatist—Tennessee Williams.

Williams, who is still in his early forties, is certain to have quite a few more dramatic masterpieces in him. The critical acclaim which has been accorded every one of his plays has already become impressive, and their titles are familiar in every household—*A Street Car Named Desire, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, The Rose Tattoo, The Glass Menagerie, Orpheus Descending, Summer and*

All books, special publications and science fiction news items indicated for review in this new column should be addressed to Sam Moskowitz, Science Fiction Collector, 127 Shephard Avenue, Newark 12, N. J.

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Smoke, and now the very controversial motion picture, *Baby Doll.*

Tennessee Williams was born in Columbus, Mississippi on March 26, 1914. His real name is Thomas Lanier Williams, and he is a descendant, on his mother's side, of the well-known Southern poet, Sidney Lanier. It is quite probable that his first professional sale was made to WEIRD TALES at the age of fourteen, for it seems highly unlikely that Williams was selling professionally elsewhere at that time.

Under the inspired guidance of its editor, Farnsworth Wright, WEIRD TALES was the crucible from which poured an astonishing stream of first-rate, serious writing. The publication of Tennessee Williams' first story will probably stand as a monument to Wright's ability to detect the buddings of a creativeness that was to flower to genius in the submission of a fourteen-year-old boy, and to literary recognition and success in dozens of other cases.

William's story in WEIRD TALES, *"The Vengeance of Nitocris,"* was published under his Christian name of Thomas Lanier, on Page 253 of the August 1928 issue of that magazine. The story is 4,500 words long and is a fictionized version of an actual historical event in old Egypt, beginning with the lines:

Hushed were the streets of the many-peopled Thebes. Those few who passed through them moved with the shadowy fleetness of bats near dawn, and bent their faces from the sky as if fearful of seeing what in their fancies might be hovering there. Weird, high-noted incantations of a wailing sound were audible through the barred doors. On corners groups of naked and bleeding priests cast themselves repeatedly and with loud cries upon the rough stones of the walks.

As Williams tells the story, the priests of Thebes were inciting the people of Egypt to revolt against Pharoah because he had extinguished the altar fires of the god Osiris, in an attempt to suppress the power of the priestly caste.

Pharoah leaves his palace to face the enraged mob, and dominates them at first by the majesty of his presence. But then an old stone stair crumbles beneath him and:

A gasp came from the mob. The Pharoah was about to fall. He was trembling violently, waving in the air, fighting to retain his balance. He looked as if he were grappling with some monstrous, invisible snake, coiled about his brightly-vestured, gleaming body.

He falls down the steps into the mob. They regard the accident as an omen, seize him and literally tear him to pieces. Nitocris, his

sister, who has witnessed the entire event in horror, is crowned queen of Thebes. She begins the construction of a magnificent new temple to further glorify the supernatural power and wisdom of Osiris. The priests assist her by rallying popular sentiment for the project.

When the temple is completed Nitocris invites all of the priests and others who participated in the slaying of her brother to attend a lavish banquet to celebrate its dedication.

The banquet takes place in a great vaulted chamber in the basement of the temple. The affair gradually degenerates into a drunken orgy. Quietly the queen slips out. Her servants escort her to the shore of the Nile, where they stumble on some strange, lever-like mechanical devices constructed into a pier. She pulls two of them. Instantly the waters are diverted into a new channel. Straight toward the hall of revelry the Nile rushes, bringing terror and sudden death.

Even before her return to the city the following morning, rumors had begun to spread throughout the city concerning a horrible disaster which had overtaken the partymakers. Realizing that it would be only a matter of hours before the people discovered the full truth:

Upon her entrance to the palace she ordered her slaves to fill instantly her boudoir with hot and smoking ashes. When this had been done she went to the room, entered it, closed the door and locked it securely, and then flung herself down upon a couch in the center of the room. In a short time the scorching heat and the suffocating thick fumes of the smoke overpowered her. Only her beautiful dead body remained for the hands of the mob.

Though readable and interesting, the story is by no means outstanding. There were crudities and some bad anachronisms, both in style and plot construction. But the fact that a fourteen-year-old boy was able to sell so early a work of imaginative fiction to a magazine with standards as high as WEIRD TALES is remarkable enough to make its crudity unimportant.

Two months later, in The *Eyrie,* one of the readers asked Farnsworth Wright: "Where does WEIRD TALES get the wonderful stories it publishes? Many of your best writers seem to write only for your magazine, as I never see their names elsewhere."

Wright replied: "Simply by keeping an open mind toward every new name . . . and by accepting stories by their value as stories regardless of the fame of the author."

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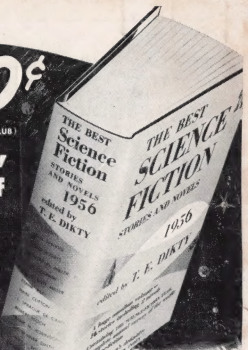
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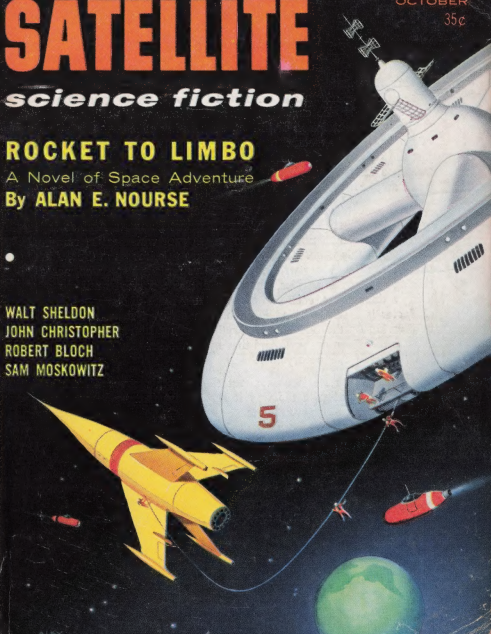

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